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The Grotesque in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates

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THE GROTESQUE IN THE FICTION
OF JOYCE CAROL OATES

by
Kathleen Burke Bloom

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of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
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VITA

The author, Kathleen Burke Bloom, is the daughter of Christine (Crissey) Burke and the late Raymond F. Burke. She was born November 24, 1946, in Evanston, Illinois.

She attended elementary schools in Norwood Park and Park Ridge, Illinois, and graduated from Regina Dominican High School, Wilmette, in 1964. She transferred from Siena Heights College, Adrian, Michigan, to Loyola University of Chicago in 1965. She was news editor of the college newspaper and in 1967 was elected to membership in Pi Delta Epsilon, journalism honor society, and Circumference, Loyola Women's Honor Society. After receiving the Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1968, she was a reporter for The New World and a Chicago correspondent for National Catholic News Service.

After teaching English at Unity (Mercy) High School, Chicago, and St. Paul of the Cross Junior High School, Park Ridge, she received a teaching assistantship from De Paul University in 1974. She was elected student representative to the Board of Graduate Studies in the English department and received the Master of Arts degree with distinction in February, 1976.

In 1975, she returned to Loyola as a teaching assistant, and, in 1977, she received an instructorship. She was elected to Alpha Sigma Nu, the National Jesuit Honor Society, in 1978, and served as editorial assistant of Restoration and Eighteenth Century Theatre Research from

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CHAPTER I

THE GROTESQUE VISION

I believe that there is no test of greatness in periods, nations, or men, more sure than the development, among them or in them, of a noble grotesque; and no test of comparative smallness than the absence of grotesque invention, or incapability of understanding it.

John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice

As she accepted the National Book Award for them in 1970, Joyce Carol Oates stated that in all of her novels, she has

tried to give a shape to certain obsessions of mid-century Americans--a confusion of love and money, of the categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge. I sense all around me, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide, the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender.¹

The very world Oates confronts and exposes presents a demonic aspect that lends itself well to grotesque treatment. As Philip Roth contends,

the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.²

¹"Remarks by Joyce Carol Oates Accepting the National Book Award in Fiction for them." Press release, Vanguard Press, March 4, 1970, reprinted in Mary Kathryn Grant, R.S.M., The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978), p. 164.

²Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," Commentary 31 (March 1961): 224.

As Tony Tanner observes in connection with Roth's comments, "outer reality comes to be experienced as a grotesque invention."³

Through her grotesque fiction, Oates attempts to show how man can survive in this mad world as she answers what she, herself describes as

the moral need to instruct readers concerning the direction to take, in order to achieve happiness (or whatever: maybe they don't want happiness, only confusion). So I feel the moral imperative to chart the psychological processes of someone. . . who has gone through suffering of one kind or another, but survives it (or almost survives).⁴

More often than not, however, Oates creates negative models whose failure to survive warns the reader of what direction not to take.

Her breed of the grotesque is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, loss of autonomy, madness, and dismemberment. These attributes of the traditional grotesque appear, in Oates, in the abstract sense. Distortion manifests itself at two levels, both as a process of decay or degeneration and as a flaw in the characters' perception. This process of negation is central to the plots of many of Oates's novels. In With Shuddering Fall, a teenager's pursuit of revenge on a demented racing car driver transforms her into a near-catatonic mental case and her religious fanaticism becomes hideously inverted. In A Garden of Earthly Delights, the once beautiful, self-made Clara disintegrates into an "old hag" whose sole interest is the

³Tony Tanner, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970 (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 296.

⁴"Transformations of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Ohio Review 15 (Fall 1973): 57.

television on which she can vicariously view the violence that so often erupted into her own life:

She seemed to like best programs that showed men fighting, swinging from ropes, shooting guns and driving fast cars, killing the enemy again and again until the dying gasps of evil men were only a certain familiar rhythm away from the opening blasts of commercials . . .⁵

A similar deterioration is evident in The Assassins, in which three gifted brothers of a prominent family are lost to the dark forces of assassin's bullet, suicide, and the underside of mysticism.

Distortion is also evident in the perceptions of many of Oates's characters, most notably her mad narrators. Expensive People and certain segments of The Assassins and Childwold mirror the distorted visions of Richard Everett, Hugh Petrie, Joseph Hurley, and Fitz John Kasch.

At both levels, this distortion is an outgrowth of the characters' exaggeration. Although occasionally physical, as in the case of the obese Pedersens in Wonderland or Richard in Expensive People, exaggeration most often manifests itself at the emotional level through the characters' obsessions. Oates's characters provide contemporary illustrations of Sherwood Anderson's theory that

It was the truths that made the people grotesques. . . . the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he

⁵Joyce Carol Oates, A Garden of Earthly Delights (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1967; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett World Library, 1969), p. 384. Cited hereafter in parentheses as GED if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.⁶

Like Anderson, Oates often creates the grotesque in this abstract sense through characters who are so obsessed with such basically good or, at least, neutral ideas as success, control, or order that they actually fail, lose control, or invoke chaos. The self-proclaimed messianic physicians in Wonderland are so obsessed with asserting their pseudo-divinity through their patients that they maim and all but kill their wives and children. Jesse Harte who successively becomes Jesse Vogel, Jesse Pedersen, and Dr. Jesse Vogel, is so obsessed with achieving complete control of his life by maintaining homeostasis in the universe he has created that he all but adapts himself out of existence, along with destroying both the universe and its inhabitants. Yvonne of The Assassins, also obsessed with maintaining control, totally loses all sense of self and is shocked that her body rebels with an incessant flow of menstrual blood. Stephen, her mystical brother-in-law, descends from the heights of communication with the gods to the depths of the void, chanting "I am the way, the tooth, and the might."⁷

Like many contemporary characters, Stephen witnesses the non-revelation offered by the waste land described by Raymond Olderman:

⁶Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (B. Huebsch, 1919; New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1958, A Viking Compass Book), p. 25.

⁷Oates, The Assassins: A Book of Hours (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1975), p. 534. Cited hereafter in parentheses as TA if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

"when you strike beneath the skin of any twentieth-century value, you will find Nothing."⁸ These heroes' obsessions with abstractions render them as inhuman as the barely human rural types in some of Oates's other works. Their obsessions lead to decadence in the sense defined by Thomas Pynchon in V.:

A decadence is a falling away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories.⁹

Besides dehumanizing them, these obsessions alienate the characters from reality, a reality which, as Jerry H. Bryant insists, "is neither a world of god-like immutable abstractions nor chaotic animality."¹⁰ Because obsessed characters also figure prominently in Oates's short fiction, the final two chapters of this study will consider her women, who obsessively flaunt or deny their femininity, and her academics, who relentlessly ride their hobby horses beyond the limits of sanity.

Wolfgang Kayser's remarks on the alienating aspect of the grotesque apply to these characters who have created a method of survival, a code of existence, which is suddenly negated. If we place ourselves in their position,

We are. . . strongly affected and terrified because it is our

⁸Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 142.

⁹Thomas Pynchon, V. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), p. 405.

¹⁰Jerry H. Bryant, The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 118.

world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this estranged world. The grotesque instills a fear of life rather than fear of death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our world become inapplicable.¹¹

As Maureen Wendall cries in them, "How can I live my life if the world is like this?"¹²

The potential of Oates's characters for destroying themselves by their intense efforts to succeed is highlighted by her use of exaggeration and distortion; but their tendency to be devoured by forces beyond their control, forces both external and internal, is a theme which Oates, like many of her contemporaries, explores through the grotesque themes of loss of autonomy and madness. As Olderman observes, "fear of becoming inanimate is an increasingly persistent theme" in contemporary novels.¹³ Not only do characters become inanimate by pouring their souls into abstract theories, but they are transformed into objects by forces greater than themselves. Young Jesse in Wonderland, poor characters in the Eden County novels and

¹¹Wolfgang Kayser, The Grottesque in Art and Literature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), p. 185. Lee Byron Jennings describes this shattering world-transformation as a "grotesque situation," in which "a violation of the basic norms of experience pertaining in our daily life" creates "a deep-seated distortion" in The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grottesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 18.

¹²Oates, them (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1969; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett World Library, 1970), p. 310. Cited hereafter in parentheses as t if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

¹³Olderman, p. 107.

stories, vulnerable women throughout Oates's oeuvre are all transformed into objects by stronger people or institutions. They face a no-win situation: if poverty and ignorance do not deprive them of autonomy, their obsession with winning causes them to be beaten at their own game of warding off the powers that be. Jesse is a prime example of the latter. Despite all of his wealth and education, he has about as much autonomy as a plant responding to sunlight. Whenever he encounters a forceful personality, he turns to clay in the stronger man's hands. Tony Tanner notes this phenomenon which was so evident in V.,

a growing tendency, discernible on all levels and in the most out-of-the-way pockets of modern history, for people to regard or use other people as objects, and, perhaps, even more worryingly, for people to regard themselves as objects. There is in evidence a systematic and assiduously cultivated dehumanization of the human by the human.¹⁴

Closely related to our fears of dehumanization and loss of autonomy is the fear of madness. Many of Oates's novels and stories feature madmen, characters who emphasize the estranging aspect of the grotesque. As Kayser observes,

In the insane person, human nature itself seems to have taken on ominous overtones. Once more it is as if an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit, had entered the soul. The encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us.¹⁵

A large majority of the characters in Oates's short fiction are insane, and an assortment of her madwomen will be considered in Chapter

¹⁴Tanner, p. 159.

¹⁵Kayser, p. 184.

Nine of this study. Mad characters also populate her novels. Karen Herz in With Shuddering Fall, Clara Walpole Revere in A Garden of Earthly Delights, and Elena Howe in Do With Me What You Will, all spend some time in mental hospitals. Although Maureen Wendall of them is never institutionalized, she spends a year in a catatonic daze, awakening only to eat.

Madness is not exclusively a female characteristic, however, and Oates's madmen are more fantastically drawn than her madwomen. Richard Everett, the obese adolescent narrator of Expensive People, delivers the novel as a prelude to his suicide by eating until his stomach bursts. Trick Monk, the uterus-eating physician in Wonderland, is similarly repulsive. Hugh Petrie, a suicidal cartoonist, thinks the first part of The Assassins to the reader from his iron lung after he almost succeeds at blowing his brains out. Fitz John Kasch, scholar turned murderer and hermit in Childwold, though much milder, also deserves a place in Oates's gallery of madmen.

The madness within is not the only terror Oates exposes through her fiction. For many of her characters, the very self within is terrifying, mad or not, because, once its masks have been stripped away, it turns out to be a non-self, so estranged from what it once was that it is truly fragmented. This fragmentation, a psychic dismemberment, is another major aspect of Oates's brand of the grotesque. Often a result of the characters' distorted perception or obsessions (most often an obsession with escaping the past), this figurative dismemberment sometimes involves a total loss of identity.

Jesse exemplifies this estranging fragmentation. Only one year

after the murder-suicide of his family, he views a news clipping of the grisly story and reflects, "no, that headline had nothing to do with him."¹⁶ Years and selves later, he is terrified to realize that he is "doomed to relive" the lives of the Jesses he has shed like snakeskins. "Who is Jesse?," his refrain throughout the novel, is finally answered on the last page by his daughter's accusation, "you are the devil." Although she is crazed with drugs and illness, the girl clearly perceives the demonic result of Jesse's obsession--fragmentation and inauthenticity.

Fitz John Katsch, the deranged scholar in Childwold, exhibits a similar fragmentation. "We outlive ourselves. We look back and recognize no one," he explains.¹⁷ Recalling his razed high school, he reflects,

my boyhood, myself: gone. I could, if I wished, summon back the high school; but I could not summon back that boy. He is not only gone, he has never been. He has never existed. A stranger, a frightening stranger! . . . he can make no claim upon me. . . . A certain force, perhaps, no more than linguistic habit, connects me with the Fitz John of those years, a boy in his mid-teens, but I have no true memory of him (101).

Jules and Maureen in them are also fragmented in their attempts to form new selves which are not scarred by the horrible traumas of

¹⁶Oates, Wonderland (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1971; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett World Library, 1973), p. 121. Cited hereafter in parentheses as W if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used. Unless otherwise specified, all references are to the revised 1973 edition.

¹⁷Oates, Childwold (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1976), p. 101. Cited hereafter in parentheses as C if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

their blighted childhoods. As Jules strikes out to seek a new life in California, he completely repudiates his past: "'Everything that happened to me before this is nothing--it doesn't exist!--my life is only beginning now'" (477). His sister, Maureen, similarly denies her past:

"I want it over with, I'm through with it, all I have to remember of it is nightmares once in a while. . . . I'm going to forget everything and everybody. I'm going to have a baby. I'm a different person" (477).

Ironically, the new Maureen is merely an anemic version of Loretta, the mother she is so intent on surpassing. By embracing a shaky future with the married man she traps for herself, Maureen is perhaps only trading old nightmares for new ones, and losing her self in the bargain.

Fragmentation through denying the past is exemplified to an extreme degree in Do With Me What You Will. Ardis Carter, also known as Mrs. Leo Ross, Ardis Karman, Marya Sharp, and Mrs. Nigel Stock, whose changes of hair color and facial structure are as frequent as her change of name, explains, "'I want. . . to get free of my past life--I want to be good. I want to change my life.'"¹⁸

Jack Morrissey, another character in the same novel, is also obsessed with escaping his past. As he remembers his impoverished parents, he complains that

"No matter how old I get. No matter what I do. I can't get

¹⁸Oates, Do With Me What You Will (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1973), p. 62. Cited hereafter in parentheses as DWM if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

free of them. . . . I loved him before he went crazy. I loved them both. It's like all the plates stacked together, or the dirty clothes in the laundry basket. . . . We're wound around each other. . . . Sometimes it's like an attack, I know I have to get free of them" (191).

By transforming himself into the "Self-Starting Self-Stopping Word Machine" (500), Jack frees himself, but he also splinters into something less than human. Elena, his lover and Ardis's daughter, is so fragmented, such a conglomeration of roles, that no one self exists beneath the masks. Do With Me What You Will is largely the account of her quest for an authentic, whole self.

Yvonne Petrie of The Assassins exhibits a similar self-estrangement. Having invented herself from nothing, as it were, she is keenly aware that her lack of a past, of a self beneath the mask, has rendered her invisible:

She did not exist. Had never existed. There was a phantom in her place, a near-transparent being or creature. She watched this creature and she watched and listened to the others in the creature's presence and felt only a dim, sullen contempt for the masquerade. . . . Where was her life, her self? They had torn her out of it, had ripped her inside out. . . .¹⁹

Jesse, Yvonne, and their numerous counterparts fail to realize a truth that Augie March grasps early in life: it is fine to disguise oneself but one must take care that the masquerade does not overwhelm the player. As Tony Tanner observes,

American heroes have always been particularly sensitive to the fact that all social life is based on certain kinds of dissembling. What it is important for them to recognize is that one can wear disguises for different reasons, and that the motive

¹⁹ Oates, The Assassins, pp. 242-43. Cited hereafter in parentheses as TA if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

may justify the mask. And what can be the most nightmarish situation for them is to find themselves surrounded by a society of people who have forgotten "what the disguises are for." To such people the only reality is falsity, and in the consequent inversion of values the American hero may find himself having to spend most of his energy simply holding on to his vital knowledge that there should be a face behind the mask and an independent consciousness behind the limited role which it chooses to adopt. Otherwise identity descends to puppetry and only the rigidity of the mask is accorded life.²⁰

Although he does not refer directly to the grotesque, Tanner describes a form of alienation and estrangement that is so extreme as to transform the individual into a puppet or a mask, images explored in Kayser's discussion of the grotesque. This tendency of Oates's characters to be devoured by the masks they donned for protection or the roles they assumed for survival is a major theme in her novels, often entwined with the central theme of the characters' obsessions rendering themselves and their worlds estranged.

Although Oates's fiction exposes our fears and forces us to face the void beneath the complex constructs of contemporary American society, it is also a barrier against the void, functioning as Tanner's "lexical playfield":

The orbicle, the chessboard, the card game, the novel--these are all ways ultimately of keeping sane in space, of establishing some known and organized terra firma which can support and sustain you in the "boundless void."²¹

Writing from the "third area" beyond imprisoning "fixity" and chaotic "flow," addressing us from the "City of Words,"²² Oates renders our

²⁰Tanner, pp. 70-71.

²¹Ibid., p. 366.

²²Ibid.

terrors of madness, imprisoning obsessions, and institutions less terrifying by the mere ordering effect of her prose.

Formal order is small comfort, however, when one faces Oates's nightmarish American landscape, filled with madmen and murderers, a world in which the only sure guarantees are its unwritten laws that any man's truth is also his poison, that the most carefully devised survival tactics lead only to destruction. But it is not a land devoid of hope. As Mary Katherine Grant admits,

The pages of her novels are filled with the inchoate, the "fantastically real"--murder, suicide, riot, rape, loss of identity, loss of community--yet out of this violence a tragic affirmation struggles to emerge, the hope of a hope.²³

Vague as it may be, the hint that there may be hope and meaning after all is peculiar to what Schevill terms "American Grotesque," a subgenre which "creates an energetic style of vision that still searches for belief in a way that European visions of the grotesque have given up."²⁴ A prominent shaper of this terrifying yet not totally hopeless vision, Oates is as

oppressed as any of her contemporaries by feelings that American life may be "too much," too crazed, too accelerated to be captured in a novel, but she hasn't lost confidence in the power of narrative fiction to give coherence to jumbled experience and to bring about a change of heart.²⁵

²³Grant, p. 3.

²⁴James Schevill, "Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht, and Williams," Twentieth Century Literature 23 (May 1977): 229.

²⁵Walter Clemons, "Joyce Carol Oates: Love and Violence," Newsweek, 11 December 1972, p. 71.

She tries to effect this change, not by telling fairy tales in which the good are rewarded and the evil are damned, but by unshrinkingly portraying the struggle to exist at all amid the hideous realities of contemporary life, from the sterile suburban waste lands, marred by spraypaint and splattered with blood, to urban slums and rural hovels, filled with "the grease stains, the stale smells, the small pathetic decorative objects of plastic. . . ." ²⁶ Her grotesque vision is the one described by William Van O'Connor as it

simultaneously confronts the antipoetic and the ugly and presents them, when viewed out of the side of the eye, as the closest we can come to the sublime. The grotesque affronts our sense of established order and satisfied, or partly satisfies our need for at least a tentative, a more flexible ordering. ²⁷

Although there may not be much of the sublime in a physician's confession that he "helped himself" to "a piece of human being," a uterus, and then broiled and ate it, he undoubtedly jars our sense of order. At the same time, we are warned of the dangers of becoming too flexible. This warning is an essential factor in Oates's fiction because of her self-proclaimed moral intent:

I still feel my own place is to dramatize the nightmares of my time, and (hopefully) to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future. ²⁸

²⁶Elizabeth Dalton, "Joyce Carol Oates: Violence in the Head," Commentary 49 (June 1970): 75.

²⁷William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque: An American Genre (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 6

²⁸Oates, "New Heaven and Earth," Saturday Review, 4 November 1972, p. 51.

It is the purpose of this study to demonstrate how Oates's grotesques, distorted, distorting, exaggerated, obsessed, helpless, mad, and fragmented as they are, reflect these nightmares, not in the concrete sense peculiar to the traditional grotesque, but in the abstract sense that is the hallmark of the American genre. Few of them find a way out, however; most are imprisoned in an estranged world in which dearly cherished codes of existence are negated and once-viable methods of survival are transformed into death traps. In the end, most of these once-human characters are reduced to shadowy embodiments of the abstract theories they obsessively espoused, thus providing a negative model for how not to survive.

CHAPTER II

NEGATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS:

THE GROTESQUE IN WITH SHUDDERING FALL

Karen Herz and Shar Rule, the incongruously paired lovers and killers in Oates's first novel, With Shuddering Fall, dramatize distortion, exaggeration, fragmentation, and madness, all elements of Oates's grotesque vision. Pathological passivity, inappropriate guilt, and destructive emotionality drive Karen to seek refuge in a parody of religion. Similarly, the powerless but swaggering, seemingly mindless, soulless Shar is only at ease behind the wheel of a racing car. Both Karen and Shar grasp madly at sources of power and meaning which, in typical grotesque fashion, turn worthless in their hands.

As her name suggests, Karen Herz "operates from" her "heart" while the ironically named Shar Rule "operates from his stomach" (127), the region of pure desire, uncomplicated by such considerations as morality. As Karen observes,

Shar came from nowhere and went nowhere. . . . Besides his muscular propriety the ordinary world paled and fell away. He was a sojourner here, and never confused the intricacies of this surface world with the reality of his own world, which consisted of himself. His simplicity, Karen thought, made him dangerous, for to him the world of man was not valued for its uniqueness, nor was human experience judged to be good or evil, nor was sin possible: there was only Shar's will, the deadly whimsical range of his desire.²⁹

²⁹Joyce Carol Oates, With Shuddering Fall (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1964; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett World Library, 1971), pp. 119-120. Cited hereafter in parentheses as WSF if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

Karen, on the other hand, is obsessed with guilt which simultaneously fuels and feeds upon the emotionalized, debased piety from which she draws her sense of power and through which she ultimately destroys Shar.

Like many of Oates's characters, Shar is

frightened at his loss of self-control and cannot understand it. He was happy only when in control of some sort: driving his machines, drinking himself into a stupor, seeing the tabulation of his threatened violence on another's face (118).

Just as the comforting rituals and traditions of religion temporarily enable Karen to transcend her guilt and helplessness, the speed and fury of auto racing empower Shar:

On the track he would be safe from entanglements with anyone--with himself, even, his usual self, the mortality in him that linked him to other men. He would be safe from time, lifted above time, he would be free of human bondage, of hatred, of jealousy, of anger, of lust, most of all, of love!--free of love! (84)³⁰

Fire is another phenomenon from which Shar derives a sense of power. During a brutally intense reunion with Karen, so intense, in fact, that Karen suffers a miscarriage, Shar is empowered by old fantasies of his plans to destroy the too orderly, "stagnant world" of Eden County:

He had dreamed of lighting a gigantic torch and turning it upon those people--burning them down, burning all civilization down, all faces, upraised hands, souls of babies waiting to grow into womanhood and devour him. It was not a life dominated by fathers Shar had fled, but a life of order, of meticulous, heart-straining order!--in imitation of man, Shar's father had arranged a chaos of junk into selections of junk, cardboard in one pile, metal in

³⁰Considering Shar's passion for the power with which racing endows him, the grotesque impact of the race of armless, legless circus freaks (157) is greatly heightened because it is presented from his perspective.

another, wood in still another--The great torch of Shar's rage would have flared up all careful piles of junk, blended them in a single holocaust of flame. Burn down everything! Fire everything, as the Herzes fired their fields each year, preparing for new growth (172-73).

As the fates of Shar and Karen, the baby grown "into womanhood" to "devour him," become more entwined, Oates fuses Shar's images of racing and fire with Karen's religious and sacrificial imagery, frequently alluding to communion in such a debased context as to render its usage grotesque. Unable to achieve true "communion" with anyone,

Shar had never been able to penetrate through the fine, invisible barrier that separated him from other people, from the world, from reality. . . . he would never escape himself. On the other side of his limit there was nothing except violence, mutilation, death; but there was no communion (184-85).

Even "at the very height of love, when Shar reached the limit of his body's control, there had been no communion" (185). So isolated is Shar that only for one moment can he even glimpse Karen's soul. In it, he reads the command to offer the ultimate holocaust by killing himself on the track.

The religious imagery is especially appropriate in the following passage because Shar has long regarded racing as a "mock communion": his reflections appear to be a grotesque parody of the mass. Gazing at his congregation, the crowd of spectators,

Shar thought that perhaps they came to share the speed, the danger, and the occasional deaths--with exultation, maybe, but with something more than that--and to force themselves into the men who represented them down on the track: they thirsted for death, they were fascinated by it, and envious of it; they gave up their identities to risk violence, but were always cheated because the violence, when it came, could not touch them. . . . They had surrendered to the insane danger, they had entrusted themselves to one of the drivers--but nothing had happened. If the driver lived they were cheated, and if he died they were cheated. It was a mock communion. . . . (183)

Although neither love nor death can bind Shar to Karen or to the rest of mankind, the death he inflicts upon himself out of his love for Karen at least makes him one with himself. Through his love for her, he believes that "the insane fragments of his life would be made whole--cleansed through violence, a communion of pain" (174). To Shar, death is a small price to pay for wholeness. Early in the novel, he dismisses his agent's assurance that he has many lives ahead of him: "'What good is that. . . . if all of them are different--all those lives--if you can't put them together!'" (101) As he prepares for the race, gazing at the sky for the last time, Shar is charmed by memories of

Long roads, new towns, glimpses of the sea--new tracks, new people, anonymity! In such a fast world a man could never be himself for long, for a simple journey through time dissociated one identity from the other: not even the expensive new highways he traveled could link the two times, like towns on a map, together. Shar's heart pounded with the excitement that he had finally transcended the fragments of his anonymity. . . . he knew who he was, he knew exactly what he was doing, and why; he was guilty--completely guilty--and his guilt, like his love, had pulled him together (185).³¹

Although Shar feels whole and free for the first time in his life as he races to his death, the reader who considers the absurdity of his sacrifice can only react with horror. The full impact of this parody can be more fully appreciated, however, in light of Karen's obsession with religion. Ironically the same "amazing grace" that motivates Shar's

³¹This theme of fragmented personalities, suggesting loss of identity, is underscored in With Shuddering Fall through doubling. Max and Ponzi, both "grotesques" (157), are linked, as are Karen and the silver-haired young prostitute that Max sends to Shar (164).

destruction also initiates Karen's degeneration.

II

Five years after its appearance, Joyce Carol Oates explained that
With Shuddering Fall

was conceived as a religious work. Where the father was the father in the Old Testament who gives a command, as God gave a command to Abraham, and everything was parallel--very strictly parallel--and how we can obey or not obey it, and if we do obey it, we're not going to get rewarded for it anyway. . . . I . . . tried to show that having faith in this largest context leaves one really nowhere. One has defeated the world and defeated one's own impulses and passions and is left with nothing--sort of like a nun.³²

Considering these views, it is not surprising that Oates creates in Karen a character who consumes herself in a passionate replay of the Abraham and Isaac story only to end "really nowhere. . . with nothing," so "like a nun" that the mental hospital to which she retreats is actually a converted convent.³³ Although the barrenness of her life and surroundings may, indeed, seem unlike, Karen's nymphomaniacal attacks on male patients certainly are not, thus producing a grotesque incongruity. In a converted nun's cell, Karen spends days following Shar's death "in a delirium of prayer and sexual excitement, murmuring prayer after prayer until her frenzy turned to thoughts about Shar. . ." (210).

³²Linda Kuehl, "An Interview With Joyce Carol Oates," Commonweal, 5 December 1969, p. 309.

³³Joyce Markert Wegs provides a detailed analysis of how the convent setting corresponds to Karen's psychic state but some of her comparisons of the removed doors and towers to male and female genitals seem a bit far-fetched, "The Grotesque in Some American Novels of the Nineteen-Sixties: Ken Kesey, Joyce Carol Oates, Sylvia Plath," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973, p. 101.

From the first pages of the novel, Karen demonstrates a remarkable tendency to revel in ecstasies of prayer and sexual excitement or to wallow in passivity and guilt. These are not superficial characteristics but constitute the totality of Karen's being, which is

defined only in terms of what it had surrendered itself to: to claims of blood and duty, to love, to religious ecstasy. In itself it had no existence. . . . she had no existence without the greater presence of someone to acknowledge her (her father; God). . . . (111)

Thus, she pursues Shar in an attempt to fulfill her father's mandate to "get him" and "kill him" (50), but when her mission is completed with Shar's suicide, Karen is again "nowhere. . . with nothing," a nonentity.

In addition to her selfless passivity, Karen's extreme emotionality qualifies her for the sacrificial role her father imposes. Before meeting Shar for the first time since her early childhood, she is in a frenzy:

"I feel so alive. . . . I want to live. I want to love-- I want to love. . . . I feel so happy. I want so much to love. . . . I want to love--to love--I want to live--I want--I don't know--" (21-22)

Karen's intense feeling for loving is often centered on religion. She had nearly fainted after her first communion, not from hunger but from "happiness that had overwhelmed her" (25). Even at the age of seventeen, she still indulges in frenzied spurts of ecstasy:

After church on Sunday, with the voices of the choir haunting her and the vision of the priest holding aloft the sacrament burned into her mind, Karen would return to her room and go to her window and kneel. There she would close her eyes and clutch her hands before her. At these times her brain would be a chaos: buzzing with light, song, incantation, the picture of herself approaching the altar, kneeling to receive the sacrament. . . . Now in her room she pressed her forehead against the window and let herself breathe in short, shallow, soblike breaths. Prayers crowded her brain, demanded to be said. She

remained kneeling for some time, her eyes shut tight, lips moving silently--the secret ecstasy of these prayers, their burning, breathless power, excited her so. . . (24-26).

The underside of this ecstasy, however, is guilt, and Karen bears a heavy, inappropriate burden of it. Having "lusted in her heart" for Shar, she feels that she has actually sinned with him:

In her mind they were guilty, shameful; the ease of death about which Shar had spoken only a while ago had seized her imagination, and she felt that both she and Shar must be punished (45).

She drives his car over a bridge and during the ensuing battle between Shar and Herz, she is again plagued by inappropriate guilt. She wants to protect her father, not only from Shar's violence, but from "the shame of what she had done if only in her father's imagination" (47). Convinced that she has sinned, Karen does not question Herz's mandate to "get" and "kill" Shar. Instead, as she pursues her mission, she marvels at "how right he was to judge her, to find her guilty!" (51)

On the evening before her fatal reunion with Shar, she had listened with fascination as her father read the Abraham and Isaac story, which

evoked in her mind visions of faceless people, humanity bound by stories, by parables. What strange dignity to fulfill one's destiny in that way--forever bound by the inhuman plot of a story, manipulated by God Himself! It was a queer thought and Karen did not really understand it, though she felt very clearly the power of its attraction (34).

When reading visibly transforms her father, Karen realizes why such "inhuman plots" attract her: "The thought of an absolution of this life appealed to Karen strangely, eerily, so captivating her mind that she hardly heard the rest of the story" (35). Karen is so empowered by the memory of this story that the next day she can face the fact

that both her father and Shar are "killers; she could absorb their wrath, drown shuddering in their fury" (49). After Karen "drowns," she emerges on another level of being, anointed with Shar's bloody hand, one of the community of killers. This assumption of a new self is not without its pain, however:

One foot came out and then the other, like the feet on a wooden doll. Karen began to experience a strange sensation then--that of being eased suddenly away from herself and able to watch from a distance her slow progress. A frail girl with blond hair blown ragged by the wind, and a blank, exhausted face, pale blue eyes that probably reflected madness. The day before she would have observed such a creature with pity, and now she was this creature-- irreparably, completely; she could not go back. She clasped her hands before her and murmured, "Forgive me. Forgive me," to the dead wood and the birds and the remembered image of her father's face" (54-55).³⁴

After a few months with Shar, Karen becomes further estranged from her lost world of Eden County when she realizes, terrified, that prayer, her old survival mechanism, no longer works for her:

The humiliation, the pain, the fear that possessed her! Karen felt that she had lost her mind. . . . In the middle of a confused "Our Father" she stopped and found herself staring at another of her many reflections. It was in a drug store window. The sight of herself staring at herself struck her as funny: murmuring to God, evoking Christ, she was in fact only talking

³⁴Similar to Karen's feeling of dissociation is the dreamlike sense that pervades With Shuddering Fall. A number of times, Karen feels that "Everything seemed to have happened in a dream" (13); "She felt entrapped in a dream" (40, 47). Karen drops out of school because, as she explains, "'A fog got between you and things'" (17). "There was something unreal about the situation" (42), she senses, and, moments later, when Shar tries to seduce her, "The sense of unreality pushed away fear, disgust, or anger" (43). Pursuing Shar, she thinks, "If this was not a dream it was related closely to a dream" (53). Wegs also notes the frequency of this motif, stating that it reflects contemporary life, in which reality, itself "seems unreal" (p. 14).

to this reflection. The thought overwhelmed and disgusted her. The very presence of her image, the slight tilting of her head --was that coquettishness?--emphasized her isolation; she was indeed lost; she deserved to be lost. Like Shar, who could not hold together the fragments of his life, Karen could not hold together the snatches of herself that were revealed to her. She was incomplete, not quite human, a mockery of a person. Her beauty mocked the vacuity of her soul (132).

The incongruity of the beautiful body encasing a dead soul, the disintegration of the ordering force of prayer, and references to Karen's psychic sense of dismemberment and loss of identity all combine to heighten the grotesque impact of this passage.

Although unable to pray, Karen still loves and for this she feels guilty. "I can't help it if I have fallen in love" (178), she thinks "defensively" to her conscience as she gazes on a window which grotesquely mirrors her sterile, bloody relationship with Shar:

Karen saw at the top of the old-fashioned window behind Shar a row of flowerlike designs, delicate and crystalline, tinted pink. There were thin petals, lined with veins, and tiny stems and leaves. In the waning light, they were rigid, cold, as though frozen in astonishment, in regret, at never having lived. . . . The tiny flowers. . . were frigid. Against the white sky their pinkness seemed touched by blood (178-79).

Although she desires, indeed yearns for Shar, still enthralled by her sense of biblical mission and unaware of its futility, Karen can only tell him to die. After her miscarriage and Shar's death, Max confronts her with the hideous magnitude of her sin which, in this particular case, is real:

"Surely you are insane! And look at you there, look at what it's done to you! Your insides drained out on a dirty bed, a mattress soaked with blood! Two people dead! Murderer! The fruit of your love is blood, the fruit of your womb--blood! all that blood! All you want of it! a mattress soaked with blood, your own blood, and Shar out alone on the track--his skull smashed, everything black, burned, all that blood--" (192-93).

Karen drags herself from the roominghouse to find that the ironically titled Cherry River has erupted into a bloody race riot, a madness which only reflects her inner state.

In a more obviously sexual version of the ecstasy described earlier in the novel, Karen's sensations as she views the riot also recall Shar's fire imagery, thus producing a grotesquely debased sacrificial motif:

Her mind was so empty and so hollow with buzzing that she thought the sun would burn right through it. She seemed to be on fire; her body stung, burned from the hot water, her feet stung on the hot pavement, the slow seeping of blood in her loins stung, red-hot, creeping down her legs (200-201).

Facing a trio of juvenile rioters, she admits her guilt: "We are all killers. We have the same hearts. We did the same thing. We need help, we need forgiveness, we--" (202).

"Helped" but not healed in the convent turned madhouse, Karen returns to her father for forgiveness. He bestows it with a peculiar blindness to his role in her deeds: "'Karen, you are my girl, my good girl! . . . I forgive you anything you did, I love you'" (224). The flaming reds of her passion for Shar, his death, and the ensuing riot, deepen to penitential purple when Karen symbolically returns home during an advent mass to find the "truths" she had embraced with such grotesque intensity systematically stripped away and rendered false.³⁵ At

³⁵Wegs also notes that this mass is grotesque, like most of Oates's descriptions of religious situations:

They seem to be distortions because they are foreign to the standard view of religion as emblematic of order and security; In Oates's view, religion is man's attempt to impose order on a chaotic universe, but it is successful only in creating an orderly surface which masks but does not change the basic underlying disorder. . . . The distortions make religion seem ludicrous to the unsympathetic: yet the overtones of heresy inherent in such a view add an additional note of terror. (pp. 97-98)

first she is comforted by the familiar ritual:

Karen was submerged in the thin splendor of the ceremony as if in a dream. The priest sang the Mass, though he had nearly no voice, and the sound of the persistent, cracked Latin somehow reassured Karen. Now I am home, she thought. Now I recognize what I have come back to.

. . . the Latin pressed through the old man's wavering voice, demolished and transformed his voice, as if it were an unleashing of sound stored up for centuries. Before its brittle splendor everyone must bow, kneel, forget himself. Impossible to remember an individual past when the Mass, with a blast of music and a whining, wrestling interplay of voices and the merciless Latin itself, cut through all pasts, erased all pasts. Karen awaited, trembling, the moment at which her individuality would die. She saw the long torturous nights and the days filled with self-pity and guilt sucked away, absolved of their reality. . . . (219-20)³⁶

Like Shar, who was "lifted above time. . . free of human bondage, of hatred. . . , of love" (84) on his empowering track, Karen is momentarily relieved of the burden of her existence by drowning in the comfortable old rituals. As the mass progresses, however, she increasingly personalizes it until the prayers become grotesque parodies. The plea for mercy, Kyrie eleison, only brings Karen the realization that her family, father, and church "have initiated me into the communion of killers, murderers" (221), an obvious inversion of the traditional communion of saints.

Karen finally admits that the Mass is unreal and that her presence

³⁶Wegs traces the sucking imagery used throughout the novel in reference to Karen, Shar, and piglike Max to the traditional grotesque hell mouth of which Karen dreams (109). Wegs concludes

Mouth, sucking and hole images seem to represent the vague but threatening and chaotic forces of the unconscious mind, a contemporary imaging of the traditional grotesque image of Hell Mouth. . . . Through linking sucking images, Oates suggests the connections of chaotic irrationality among the unconscious mind, madness, and religion. (111)

alone demands worship. She imagines that her family regards her as a Christ-figure. To their minds, she thinks,

Karen. . . had suffered to prove to them the justice of their universe. . . . the sacrifice of the Mass was a distant, calculated ritual, and the perfunctory humility of the priest was for their eyes alone, but Karen's sin and penance and expiation had been real enough, and showed, probably, in her eyes or somewhere in her face, the crushing justice of a moral universe (220-21).

The inversion and devaluation of the mass culminate and complete the novel's motif of sacrificial imagery at the consecration when Karen envisions herself, not Christ, as the embodiment of the miracle:

Here is a real sacrifice, her father might say, pointing up to the altar. You think you have given yourself, you think you have been fed upon--and so in a way you have--but still you are alive and that is a miracle. You were not crucified and changed into flat pieces of bread--and if Christ were not God, but only Christ, only a man, is His suffering any less? It is more, certainly more: we men do not have resurrections (222-23).

This inversion of religious motifs is not the mere decoration that Dalton describes when she argues that Oates attempts to endow violence with a religious meaning withough the "genuine religious vision" of Flannery O'Connor who uses violence to underscore her religious themes.³⁷ On the contrary, the inversion of religion in With Shuddering Fall is central to the novel's systematic revelation of the dilemma faced by Karen and by many inhabitants of the twentieth-century waste land: as Karen reflects, "It is insane to look for meaning in life, and it is insane not to; what am I to do?" (223) As Karen is now aware, a mindless, literal commitment to the demands of traditional religion

³⁷Dalton, p. 75.

can lead one to madness as easily as the utter lack of any belief.

There is no question, however, that Oates and O'Connor differ vastly in their use of religious motifs. Karen seems as obsessed with her mission of killing Shar as young Tarwater is with his mission of baptizing Bishop in The Violent Bear It Away. Both novels abound in fire and other sacrificial motifs but with radically different effects. As O'Connor wrote of her novel,

Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal.³⁸

Oates, on the other hand, creates the kind of distortion that may destroy illusions as it reveals the meaninglessness that may lurk beneath the most fervent facade of belief. As she explained several years after the novel's publication,

I was working myself out of the religious phase of my life and tried to show that having faith in this larger context leaves one really nowhere. One has defeated the world and defeated one's own impulses and passions and is left with nothing--sort of like a nun.³⁹

Oates disavows O'Connor's influence, explaining that O'Connor is so religious, and her works have to be seen as religious works with this other, rather creepy dimension in the background, whereas in my writing there is only the natural world.⁴⁰

³⁸Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), p. 162.

³⁹Kuehl, p. 309.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 308.

Perhaps, as Wegs suggests, Oates's view of religion as a purely natural phenomenon heightens the grotesque impact of her "religious novel." Oates feels that religion is "a kind of psychological manifestation of deep powers, deep imaginative, mysterious powers." She argues that, "though these things are natural, they are still inaccessible and cannot be understood, cannot be controlled."⁴¹ Wegs reflects on the implications of this view of religion in reference to With Shuddering Fall, maintaining that

it is not surprising that she evokes the grotesque so frequently in this novel, for the grotesque too represents the incursion of the mysterious, inexplicable forces which in the past were identified as demonic or supernatural but are now often described in psychological terms as eruptions from the dark chaos of the unconscious mind. Thus, when Karen makes the leap into the absurd, the results are not the same as for Abraham, Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, for without faith, her action is without meaning.⁴²

Obviously, the religious aspects of With Shuddering Fall provide a large proportion of its grotesque elements, but it must be emphasized that the characters, themselves, are the major sources of the grotesque. As in most of Oates's novels, their obsession with power causes them to estrange themselves from their world and ultimately, to lose it

⁴¹Ibid. Michael Foucault reflects on the mysterious, uncontrollable aspects of religion, specifically Catholicism, in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), p. 255:

A source of strong emotions and terrifying images which it arouses through fears of the Beyond, Catholicism frequently provokes madness; it generates delirious beliefs, entertains hallucinations, leads men to despair and to melancholia.

⁴²Wegs, p. 106.

entirely. Both Karen and Shar, along with their counterparts in Oates's later novels, dramatize the excesses of which Bryant writes because they lose touch with "the real world of the human being" which "is neither a world of god-like, immutable abstractions," the world Karen envisions, nor the "chaotic animality"⁴³ espoused by Shar. Somewhere between the two, despite the meaninglessness of modern existence, lies the golden mean Oates recommends as the sole hope of survival.

⁴³Bryant, p. 112.

CHAPTER III

ROOTLESS IN THE GARDEN

The grotesque pervades Oates's second novel, A Garden of Earthly Delights, which is much more than the naturalistic account of an ambitious migrant worker's child's rise and fall. As Rose Marie Burwell maintains in "Joyce Carol Oates and an Old Master,"

the story is, like the painting by Hieronymus Bosch, an allegory of the innate human tendencies which perpetuate the fall of man, a lesson in the hollowness and fragility of transient achievements and human aspirations.⁴⁴

In her typical fashion, Oates endows her characters with survival skills that metastasize into the obsessions that ultimately destroy them. What begins as a normal desire for autonomy and stability in Carleton Walpole, a dispossessed migrant worker, becomes a destructive mania in his daughter, Clara who, with her demonic lover's help, creates a monster in their son, Swan.⁴⁵ The increasing distortion of these normal instincts through three generations of Walpoles is reflected in the variations upon the central image of the garden

⁴⁴Rose Marie Burwell, "Joyce Carol Oates and an Old Master," Critique 15 (1973): 49. Burwell concludes that there are numerous correspondences between Oates's and Bosch's worlds in terms of structure and movement.

Wegs also notes correspondences of the sections of the tripartite novel to the panels of the Tryptich (pp. 117-18).

⁴⁵Burwell explores several possible implications of Swan's name, including Bosch's membership in the Confraternity of the Swan, the swan as a symbol of evil, and the parallels between the Zeus/Leda and Lowry/Clara unions. (p. 58, n. 18)

which, as Wegs notes,

represents man's attempt to control his world. The garden begins as a representative of the natural world but then starts to take on more and more grotesquely sinister overtones as the novel progresses. The vast truck gardens in which the Walpoles and their fellow migrant workers labor are completely out of their control. . . .⁴⁶

Carleton keenly senses his powerlessness as he recalls how the loss of his farm forced him to begin "working on the season" with his young family. One reads his reflections on the loss of his own garden with the sense of estrangement he must have felt:

Everything changed. It was like the earth turning to sand and falling away beneath your feet, something dazzling and clamorous. You could get your balance back but you could never get used to it because nothing was the way it should be, nothing came along right, everything was changed (22).

His daughter, Clara, born in a ditch by the side of the road, does not sense the change. She only feels deprivation and views the middle-class world of "real houses," schools, and men who wear suits as strange. "Everything was so strange here!" (45) she reflects on one of her first and last days of school. Struggling to make sense of the black markings in her reader, Clara can hardly comprehend the pictures:

There was a picture of a strange man on that page, dressed in a strange way. He had a white shirt on but it was half covered up by a kind of coat, a short coat, that didn't come closed all the way up in front but left part of his chest to get cold. A red thing was tied around his neck. The strange coat was blue and the man's trousers were blue too. Clara wondered what kind of man this was supposed to be (46).

In addition to providing the reader with a sense of the ignorance and

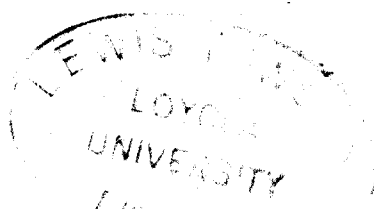
⁴⁶Wegs, p 118.

poverty of the wandering Walpoles, this passage demonstrates a form of the grotesque Wegs describes in reference to another passage in the same novel, a form which depends upon a sense of estrangement arising from "the feeling that the other persons, especially those of a different socio-economic class, really inhabit another world."⁴⁷

For the most part, however, the first section of the novel contains few grotesque elements. Mainly, it provides the etiology of the grotesque which becomes more evident when the focus of the novel shifts to thirteen-year-old Clara, who runs away from her family at the end of Part I. "'I want lots of things an' I'm goin' to get them --don't you think I'm like my ma or Nancy or anybody, I'm not,'" Clara vows to Lowry as she runs away from the Walpole's campsite. "'I don't know what it is but I want it. . . I'm goin' to get it, too!'" (123-24) Clara certainly does "get" and though she can't yet say what she plans to "get," she has a vague idea of how she'll get whatever she desires when her previously dormant brain suddenly awakens: "Now, at the beginning of her new life, she was going to think about everything and get it clear" (125). Clara admires the consciousness of people like Lowry who "knew. They could see. They did not live in a world made up by someone else, controlled by someone else, herded around on buses" (125).

Despite these resolutions to achieve autonomy by considering the causes and consequences of her actions, Clara mindlessly flies to the appropriately named town of Tintern, more like the youth who runs

⁴⁷Wegs, p. 121.



"from something that he dreads than one/Who sought the thing he loved." Clara feels estranged from her new world, "as if she and everyone she knew had been lifted up and shaken violently and set down again in a new place" (127). Pathetically, however, Clara no longer knows anyone but Lowry, who passes through town very rarely, leaving her alone for weeks at a time. She fills the hours after her dime-store job by assembling a tacky garden of gewgaws in her tiny room above the store.

After a year in Tintern, Clara, "not able to recall having come from anywhere" (128), resembles Jesse of Wonderland and other "inauthentic" Oates heroes, people who try to insure their futures by obliterating their pasts but manage only to fragment themselves. Lacking close personal contact with anyone, Clara begins to drift away from the human race altogether. At the ripe old age of fourteen, she complains to Lowry of feeling "'so old, so tired. . . . It's hard to know what kind of face to have'" (135). Like many of Oates's insecure heroines, Clara must create her face from nothing, a face which would be grotesque on a woman of any age:

she had a red mouth that looked like something pasted on her, like plastic lips for Hallowe'en, and there were reddened spots on her cheeks that were either obvious or faint depending on the light (131).

A face and a sense of self and the past from which she comes are not all that Clara lacks. She is keenly aware that

she did not have what. . . everyone else had but never thought about: parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, people who had known them since birth without ever thinking much about it. It was this fact, their being known by a community of people, that Clara would never have. . . (150).

If Clara's "careful" commendation of her life into the hands of the more competent Lowry provides her with a family after all, it is quite accidental. Clara regretfully reflects that her child "would be born the same way she had been born: just an accident" (186), realizing with horror that her connection with Lowry, in addition to being an accident in itself, has only produced another. Deciding to assume control of her destiny once and for all by deceiving the wealthy Curt Revere into thinking the child is his, Clara takes pride in her newly discovered power: "All her life she would be able to say: Today she changed the way her life was going and it was no accident. No accident" (198).

As with Shar of With Shuddering Fall and Jesse of Wonderland, Clara's terror of "accidents" and mania for insuring herself against them transforms her into a monster and creates another in her son, Swan. As Grant observes, this terror and her choice of Revere as a source of protection are not surprising:

Her past experiences have made her hungry to possess things, to claim objects as her own--not only objects, but also his land, his house, all that belongs to him. She bribes her son Swan with the promise that all the concrete evidences of stability, possession, and ownership will be his. The need to belong, to be rooted, still plagues Clara, and she passes these feelings on to her son.⁴⁸

During the long years she awaits Mrs. Revere's death, raising Swan alone on the farm Revere has given her, Clara revels in the garden that was hers "and no one else's." Maybe this "garden was as much of the world as she wanted" (228) but she has grander designs for Swan,

⁴⁸Grant, p. 83.

"Lowry's baby, the only thing she really owned" (201). Already a mere "thing," young Swan is programmed from earliest infancy to possess the knowledge, autonomy, wealth, and power Clara so long craved for herself. She vows

to make of Lowry's child a person to whom everything would make sense, who would control not just isolated moments in his life but his entire life, and who would not just control his own life but other lives as well (201).

"'You're going to get things that he could never give you, you're going to get a last name, a real name, and a whole world to live in--not just a patch of world. . .'" (248), she proclaims to Swan, who inherits a grotesquely magnified portion of her greed for knowledge, autonomy, wealth, and power.

Swan is also plagued, obsessed, and ultimately controlled by Lowry's curse: "'I can see it right here--all the things you're going to kill and step on and walk over'" (217). Young Swan instinctively knows that Revere is not his father and although he saw Lowry only once very briefly during his early childhood,

he knew the adult he would grow into; not Revere, but someone else. That other man had a face Swan could almost see but he did not worry about not quite seeing it, because he would recognize it if he saw it again and in any case he would grow into it without trying (266).

When he does "grow into it," simultaneously assuming the mantle of the Revere empire, Swan has accidentally killed or dispossessed Revere's three legitimate sons. "The American Dream becomes a Nightmare" for him⁴⁹ because Swan cannot enjoy the power he has so long craved: he

⁴⁹David Madden, "The Violent World of Joyce Carol Oates" in The Poetic Image in Six Genres (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 45.

is too obsessed with the idea "that he was a killer who had not finished with his work yet but was waiting for his deed to rise up in him" (365).

Lowry's curse is concretized in the chicken hawk imagery which produces several grotesque effects. In addition to suggesting "the dark forces of the human unconscious," as Wegs suggests, they also correspond to "the dark circling birds of Bosch's Eden."⁵⁰ When young Swan struggles to recall the "strange blonde man" and what he had said,

the memory. . . swept down upon him like one of the big chicken hawks everyone hated, with its dusty flapping wings and its scrawny legs, and Swan could almost smell the fetid odor of that breath (256).

A few years later, when he enters the Revere, and now his own home for the first time, his "father" fades before the more vivid ghost of his true father, "whose presence seemed to be descending over this house like a bird slowly to the earth, its wings outstretched in a lazy threat" (261).

This threat is partially realized a few years later when Swan inadvertently kills Robert, his favorite half-brother. The boy has just shot a chicken hawk and Swan, revolted by the sportive killing, begins to sense Lowry's spirit fluttering in his brain. In this instance, the bird imagery symbolizes both "violence and the yearning

⁵⁰Wegs, pp. 125-26; Burwell, p. 54. A third association of the term chicken hawk is the street term for pederast. Although Lowry does not physically rape his son, he psychically violates him.

for it:"⁵¹

In his brain there was a bird fluttering to get out. He was aware of it in his most helpless, frantic moments, or when he was exhausted. Its wings beat against the walls of his head, pounding along with his pounding ears, and would not give him peace. . . . He could feel this bird struggling to get free. It was like the hot round ball of nausea in his stomach, something that had come up out of the depths of himself and which he had to get rid of (308-309).⁵²

Killing and violence repel Swan and, not surprisingly, so does the food he associates with it.

the pheasants and chickens, their own chickens, dead and ready to be picked of their feathers, with that warm sickening odor rising about them The guts in the bucket. They put the chickens in the oven and browned them some and there they were, right on the Sunday table with its white tablecloth and the candlesticks. . . , everything clean and fancy--and in the middle of it the dead chicken, roasted. Out came their guts, which were changed for stuffing now and spiced up, and their hearts and liver and gizzard and whatnot, and everyone's mouth watered. . . .

And sometimes it wasn't all the way roasted but would be red and run red, thin trickles of watery blood that got into your potatoes. . . . In his mouth the strands of meat were each vivid and clear; the patches of gristle, fat, muscle, stray flecks of bone. It was all real and all alive. Clara had said, shivering, "What if the heart comes alive and starts beating in your mouth?" (303)

Ultimately, the hawk image symbolizes more than man's tendency to devour and destroy his fellow creatures, human and inhuman. As Swan's obsession with his violent destiny intensifies, the associative power of the hawk image reaches beyond more earthly fathers. Reflecting on the "grotesque violence" of the Old Testament which Revere, like old Herz, reads aloud on Sunday evenings, Swan feels that

⁵¹Wegs, p. 126.

⁵²Further hawk imagery occurs on pp. 345 and 357.

Lurking over everything was the spirit of God, restless and haunting; it would swoop down now and then like a bird of prey, like a chicken hawk, and seize someone in its beak. Swan had the uneasy knowledge that he would be one of those seized by the throat if the world he and Clara now lived in belonged to that God. . . . (313-14)

That Swan denies the presence of such a powerful god in his world cannot lessen his sense that the wages of his parents' sin are beginning to fall due. Like Karen Herz, he feels doomed to enact the retribution demanded by the angry, though perhaps nonexistent god. Wealthy and powerful as he is, Revere's illegitimate heir senses that he is as locked into his role as his dispossessed grandfather was imprisoned in his. As he confides to his favorite cousin,

"I don't want to be a character in a story, in a book. I don't want to be like someone in a movie. I don't want to be born and die and have everyone watching--reading alone. Everything decided ahead of time--" (378)

When Swan drives out to the farm to fulfill his murderous destiny, his worst fears are realized as he becomes totally estranged from the world and from himself:

He felt like one of those actors in the movie he had seen, speeding on into the dark without especially thinking, confident that someone had written out the words and actions for him to fulfill (380).

Swan's obsession with his destiny overrides his obsession with control when he kills Revere and himself, reenacting the nightmare explored by many contemporary American novelists. As Tony Tanner observes,

there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; . . . there is also an abiding American dread that something else is patterning your life, that there are all

sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.⁵³

If Swan, like so many contemporary heroes, loses his fight for control, however, it is not for lack of effort. Like his grandfather and mother, Swan respects the ordering power of thought and knowledge. Unlike them, however, he is at times obsessed with acquiring it. As a young boy he feels the pressure of

so much thinking to do, there were so many books yet in the schoolhouse and at home--so much to think about, sort out in his mind, get memorized and set down so that he could go on to something else (306).

By the time he reaches high school, this thirst for learning becomes grotesquely exaggerated:

At times he woke to the fear that his head would burst, that facts and ideas were being squeezed into his brain too fast, before he was able to make room for them. . . . His ears were like holes in his head that sucked in information and stored it away, useless as it might seem to be at the moment (339).⁵⁴

This thirst for knowledge places Swan in a hopeless dilemma because it is pitted against his mania for the Revere holdings:

He could not go away to college because he was terrified of leaving this land, of relinquishing what he had won in his father. And he was terrified that he himself might forget the strange, almost magical air of Revere's world, those vast acres of land that lay beneath the magical name--if he should forget all he had learned, all he had been born for, what then? . . . Knowledge was power and he needed power. He could feel his insides aching for power as if for food. . . . he felt his muscles tense as if preparing themselves for violence. Something fluttered in his head and he dug the tender flesh around his thumbnail until it was raw (345).

⁵³Tanner, p. 15

⁵⁴Further references to this obsession with knowledge appear on pp. 341 and 342.

In the end, Swan turns his back on formal education, relieved to be

safe forever from the great bulging shelves of libraries everywhere, all those books demanding to be read, known, taken into account--that vast systematic garden of men's minds that seemed to him to have been toiled into its complex existence by a sinister and inhuman spirit (360-61).

Delivered from this terrifying garden, Swan is free to manage Revere's. Appropriately, his obsession with the family and its holdings is often associated with garden imagery, thus completing the imagaic cycle begun in the truck gardens Swan's grandfather tended in Part I, through the piece of world Clara so proudly occupied in Part II. In Swan's case, his garden associations are invariably sinister and threatening. His desire to become a true Revere "rose up in him like a wounding, deadly blossom opening inside his body. He had to be one of them and to understand and possess everything. . ." (318). Even before he assumes a position in the Revere home, Swan visits the macabre garden of a Revere's wake in a scene which adumbrates his ultimate effect on the family: "The flowers banked so solicitously about the corpse were banked about him too, leaning over onto him. . ." (287).

His blighting effect on the family is again foreshadowed through garden imagery when Swan inhales the air of "his" farm:

smelling of dead things or things gone overripe and rotten--grapes on invisible vines back in the woods, pears and plums and honeysuckle and worm-ridden apples and elderberries and chokeberries--all these things that made so dotted and immense the world he had been born into but was not yet ready for (306, italics mine).

Swan regards the Lutheran cemetery as a veritable "garden" of Reveres (325) and fears their property, "all that land, so much land, tended

and tortured into a garden so complex one might need a lifetime to comprehend it. . . ." (347). As Wegs notes, this garden is "like a maze in which one may lose his way, a demonic garden."⁵⁵ Guided only by his sense of Lowry's prophecy, Swan finally does lose his way, his control, and his life.

Although the major burden of the grotesque falls upon Swan, who carries his parents' appetites for control, security, and violence to an extreme, other grotesque aspects of the novel are evident. A subtle inversion of religion produces a brand of grotesque not unlike that which was explored in the previous chapter. That religion is useless to the "blessed" poor is suggested when twelve-year-old Clara notices an old church (70). With its boarded-up windows and surrounding weeds, it is emblematic of Oates's view of religion. Clara's hope of visiting a church some time is realized a year later when two do-gooders from the local evangelical ladies' society invite her to a service. The ominously named Reverend Bargman suggests that Clara "may be entering the threshold of a new life. A new life" (90).

Ironically, she is. On that very night, Clara discovers her god, not the avenging figure of whom the Reverend moans and weeps, but the devouring force of sexual desire. Looking at Lowry for the first time, she senses that

the God the minister had talked of was present. He was this hot pressure that hung over her, this force lowering Himself into her body, squirming into her. That God was still hungry, the hamburgers hadn't done Him any good. . . . (95).

⁵⁵Wegs, p. 119.

Quivering with desire for him, Clara

felt driven by the same God that had possessed the minister, making his voice shrill and furious at once, making his legs jerk him about on that platform. God had torn out of that man's mouth sobs and groans of desperation; Clara understood what he must have felt (101).

For two years, Clara's yearning is unfulfilled as Lowry treats her as he would a younger sister. Finally, however, she stands on the brink of the Eden River, about to immerse herself, a gesture that could be regarded as a mock baptism to mark her passage "into a new country," the state inhabited by the deflowered. Clara thirsts for

the kind of love held out to her in the comic books and romance magazines she was now able to read for herself. . . love that would transform her and change her forever. It had nothing to do with the way other girls got pregnant and fat as cheap balloons--that wasn't the kind of love she meant (164-5).

This conception of love is analogous to Shar's racetrack or Jesse's scalpel and, like them, it is grotesque. As Wegs explains, Oates's characters often search for a "positive, fixed, orderly, and perfect" power which leads, not to the sublime, but

to the timeless secular sources, love and money. Because these forces are usually depicted in their contemporary manifestations in movies, popular romances, television, and songs, they appear grotesquely debased to the reader.⁵⁶

As soon as Lowry, Clara's "dream person" is realized in a physical relationship, she sees that he is more demonic than divine. Love does "transform and change her forever" as it takes hold, "a force that was like a devil squirming inside her, lashing out in his frenzy" (175).

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 89.

This force transforms Clara physically when she conceives Swan, but the psychic change is clearly grotesque:

She was exhausted with this love for him, this physical frenzy that was like a devil clawing and screaming inside her to get free. She would have gladly freed it--vomited it up--but it had hold of her and didn't really want to let go the devil she carried about with her to the most innocent places--even to church one Sunday--was a creature that reached and lunged out into every part of her body, prying, prodding, teasing, not content with anything feeble or gentle. It was all for Lowry, for his love (191).

Although Lowry is transformed from a godlike to a demonic force, churches maintain their old sexual association as far as Clara is concerned. She meets Revere at a church wedding, and again at a church picnic. After the birth of Swan, Clara attends a young murdered friend's funeral in town, after which she makes love with a nameless man she picks up at a gas station, a man who somehow reminds her of Lowry. At a Revere funeral in Hamilton, she begins an affair with a cousin. No matter how many men she claims, no matter how much material wealth she obtains, Clara never ceases to desire Lowry "violently" and knows she will "never be free of him" (244).

She finally curbs the demonic force of her passion, channelling her energies instead into maintaining the control she also desires, a control that will end all "accidents." As Robert H. Fossum observes,

Clara can control the phlegmatic Revere better than the restless passion whose claims she denied in renouncing Lowry. . . . Ironically, the zeal for control which led her to Revere has taken Swan's destiny partially out of her hands, while her uncontrolled promiscuity contributes to her son's equally uncontrollable emotional turmoil.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Robert H. Fossum, "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," Studies in the Novel 7 (Summer 1975): 287.

When the turmoil erupts with his murder of Revere, an innocent victim, and his suicide, the wages of Swan's parents' sins are paid, but only partially. A demented, decayed Clara is left to live out her days as an "old hag" who enjoys only the violence that flashes across her television screen, just as it flashed through her early years and beneath the controlled appearance of her years in Eden. When Walter Sullivan complains that this ending "is a sad fading away of a book that combines much that is powerful and sharp,"⁵⁸ he fails to appreciate its grotesque appropriateness. As noted in the first chapter of this study, Clara's rise and fall vividly dramatize grotesque distortion that arises from emotional exaggeration, the same type of distortion dramatized in With Shuddering Fall. That the Walpole clan's progression runs full circle from the depths of misery to great heights of satisfaction and back down to misery, greatly intensifies the grotesque effect of the novel. A similar progress will be traced through many of Oates's other novels, including Wonderland and The Assassins.

⁵⁸Walter Sullivan, "The Artificial Demon: Joyce Carol Oates and the Dimensions of the Real," The Hollins Critic (December 1972): 8.

CHAPTER IV

SUBURBAN GROTESQUE: EXPENSIVE PEOPLE

Expensive People, Oates's third novel and the second in the family trilogy consisting also of A Garden of Earthly Delights and them, features distortion as both perspective and process, exaggeration, fragmentation, and madness. Most of these grotesque elements arise from the narrator, Richard Everett, a two-hundred-fifty-pound, eighteen-year-old madman who plans to eat himself to death.

Richard repeatedly reminds the reader that the novel may not be a novel after all, but a piece of spontaneous, accidental excrement:

like the products of violent seizures of nausea that overtake many of us after an arduous dinner. . . .

. . . of all human endeavors, art is the most pulsating, rippling, seething, improbable, and unpredictable of all the creations of man, like those babies born after expectant mothers' exposure to certain drugs and diseases. . . . You start out . . . wanting only to get the truth down and forget about it, . . . but somewhere in the process everything breaks down, won't work, is just an illusion. . . . There is a surface order and beauty, yes, but don't let that fool you. It's all as Tennyson remarked wisely, "We poets are vessels to produce poetry and other excrement."⁵⁹

Richard hints that his production occurs at the same instinctual level as excretion, involving no thought whatsoever: "Until I write it out I won't even know what I think about it" (6).

⁵⁹Joyce Carol Oates, Expensive People (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1968; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett World Library, 1970), p. 87. Cited hereafter in parentheses as EP if identification of the novel is needed; otherwise only the page number is used.

In addition to his not fully conscious perspective, the distorting effects of time and his ambivalence towards his parents on his already questionable memories combine with his madness to render him an extremely unreliable narrator. As he says,

I lived all this mess but I don't know what it is. I don't even know what I mean by "it." I have a story to tell, yes, and no one else could tell it but me, but if I tell it now and not next year it will have come out one way, and if I could have forced my fat, heaving body to begin this a year ago it would have been a different story then. And it's possible that I'm lying without knowing about it. Or telling the truth in some weird, symbolic way without knowing it, so only a few psychoanalytic literary critics (there are no more than three thousand) will have access to the truth, what "it" is (7).⁶⁰

Richard's tenuous grasp of reality is paralleled in the child-narrator of "The Molesters," a short story of Oates's that is incorporated into Expensive People.⁶¹ The young heroine, who suppresses all but the terror of what happened to her, resembles Richard, as he observes in his analysis of the story,

How will we know what mad acts were performed upon us, what open-heart surgery, what stealthy home brain surgery? Can we trust our well-meaning memories, our feeble good natures,

⁶⁰Perhaps in an effort to humor these three thousand psychoanalytic literary critics, Oates has Richard vomit at the sight of a cylinder:

I stared for two minutes at a diagram of a cylinder with its various dimensions indicated and gradually a sensation of disgust and horror rose in me, mysteriously, until my trembling hand moved over the thing to hide it.

.
I threw up what remained of breakfast. . . , trying to grind the mess away to nothing beneath my feet. . . . (46-49).

⁶¹"The Molesters" originally appeared in The Quarterly Review of Literature 15 (3rd Quarter 1968): 393-409.

which want to remember only the best about our parents, which brush aside ugly thoughts? (181)

In a way, his memoir is Richard's attempt to come to terms with his terror, with those "ugly thoughts," or, as he ominously states, "This memoir is a hatchet to slash through my own heavy flesh and through the flesh of anyone else who happens to get in the way" (6).

It is also, as Fossum observes, an attempt to gain control over his life:

In practicing his writer-mother's profession, Richard is trying to re-create the person he thinks he has destroyed as well as seeking to order and control his life, past and present.⁶²

Like the compulsive rememberers, Carleton Walpole and Joseph Hurley, he is trying to grasp a lost reality but, unlike them, Richard is not even sure that what he remembers is real. He wonders at times if his mother, Nada, is not "an embryonic creature of my own making, my extravagant and deranged imagination" (100).

In addition to his highly subjective, distorting perspective, Expensive People's peculiar narrator writes in an exaggerated style, marked by a preponderance of food, vomit, and grotesque imagery. At times, it seems so exaggerated as to be a parody of itself, as in the following conclusion of a chapter:

The best I can do to summon up the beauties of a past age is to juggle my syntax as well as I can, feeble though it turns out, at times closing my eyes and giving my fingers license to probe out what they will on the typewriter, spluttering out loose spines of sentences with as much frantic desperation as one steers a soap-box cart down a

⁶²Fossum, p. 289.

sharply inclined plane, hoping for the best but not expecting it, with a pale bravado of a grimace, a grin for the spectators standing uneasily on the sidewalk; yet conscious of the many times the splatter falls short, dribbles, vomited out with the sort of asthmatic gasp the emits rusty water from antique faucets or rusty blood from panting fat-encrusted hearts.

This chapter must at one time or another throw up its hands in defeat ("throw up" is a deliberate pun, part of a pattern of puns, . . .) (91).

Richard possesses a remarkable ability to isolate the most disgusting topics for close analysis, such as when he notices a cockroach on the "gold-papered wall" of the exclusive suburban country club dining room (81) or when he presents an explicit blow-by-blow account, in the most literal sense, of his father's slaughter of the chipmunks that had taken refuge in the Everett's spotless, suburban basement (192-93).

In other instances, Richard's grotesque perspective colors his view of everyday objects, such as when he compares a road map to "the plan for the intestines of a giant insect" (143). In another passage, he views

A gigantic silver balloon in the sky, like a remnant of some lost historic age, a monster descending to gobble up my lovely mother and myself and keep us locked forever in his warm, dark belly. Just the two of us. But the balloon turned slowly in the blue sky and exhibited a most disappointing tail: Buy Baxters Buicks! (74)

Ironically, even his most monstrous fantasy is deflated and reduced to absurdity by the materialism of the American suburbs which he is satirizing.

Richard's description of Johns Behemoth Boys' School, "an elegant nightmare concoction made by adults for adults, to further the aims and fantasies of adults" (46), seems less the work of a madman than

that of an imaginative former student with a grotesque slant to his axe-grinding:

Surely no mortal human beings had ever lived in that big main house. No, I like to think that giants had lived there, archangels or monsters. And up behind it, terraced into a hill, was a garden of exquisite beauty tended by a deaf-mute Any monstrous hero would have cultivated this beauty as a delicious contrast to his own degradations (35).

His description of the humanities building on the Behemoth campus is classically grotesque in its fusion of categories and threatening tone:

the big one, with a surly, encrusted look, its windows like multiple eyes with thick, leafless vines over them like eyebrows. . . . Here there were no deceptions about the torment knowledge promised. . . . (39)

Richard's ability to evoke the grotesque is not limited to literary pursuits. He visualizes a painting of his birth, "The Abortion that Failed," which, in its vivid portrayal of the suburban waste land, its inane pleasures and various torments, could serve as a contemporary American version of Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights."

Richard Everett is, of course, the abortion that failed. Like Clara and Swan in A Garden of Earthly Delights, he inherits qualities from his parents, but in such great intensity that he is rendered even more grotesque than they are. The fact that his parents are not themselves whole but are fragmented only heightens the grotesque impact.⁶³

Elwood Everett incongruously looked more like a derelict than the immensely wealthy and successful man that he was:

With his cheerful, sad brown eyes, always a little puffed he looked like a bloated elf, like a man who has been awake all night lying in his rumpled street clothes (24).

⁶³Wegs, p. 137.

Richard views him as both loving and threatening, sometimes sensing that the real, powerful Elwood Everett is just "waiting somewhere off in the wings" to spring on him (26). Elwood's most remarkable and, in Richard's view, damning quality is his love for Nada: "that was what did us all in, his extravagant, stupid love for Nada" (22). As this analysis will show, however, the "love" Richard feels for his mother is even more obsessive than Elwood's.

If Richard's view of his father is bifurcated, his view of his mother is even more complex. Not only does she appear to manifest three personalities, but each has a separate name and devouring passion. Nadia Romanov, the darkly mysterious daughter of even more mysterious Russian emigres, is most notable for her fine fiction, her solipsism, and her mania for freedom and power. As Richard observes,

She might have believed her brain too finely developed to be overloaded with the trivia of daily reality, daily suffering. Her brain was instead stuffed with books. What was "only real" couldn't be very important, and I have to confess to feeling this way myself. I have caught her solipsism from her, the way I used to catch colds and flu from her (85).

The strain of such a cerebral existence, which is hardly alleviated by assuming the smothering persona of Mrs. Elwood Everett, drives Nadia to periodic flights from her too real husband and son. Although Richard's extreme love and dependency are quite evident, Nadia refuses to be "suffocated" by him:

"I don't particularly care to be called Mother by anyone. I don't respond to it. I'm trying to hold my own and that's it. No Mother, no Son. No depending on anyone else. I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it. You're not going to blame me for anything" (188).

Although Nadia rejects the conventional love of husband and son as threats to her freedom, she, ironically enough, is imprisoned by her addiction to love affairs. As Richard explains,

She was a greedy woman, my Nada. . . . All of history gives us these weird writers whose scribbling must in itself have been a kind of grossness, but not enough to satisfy, coming to London or Paris or Rome or New York, anywhere, to fill their stomachs and brains with whatever was handy. But even as Juvenal vomited as he ate, so Nada did vomit back out much of what she took in so eagerly: and even as Sterne and Churchill met their ends in excess, so did Nada invite her finish by an excess of greed (190).

Yet there is a curious inconsistency in Nadia's character. Although she is so beautiful and accomplished that she can often flout conventional standards, she is often paralyzed by what she regards as the "higher value" of suburban society. Richard explains that

Nada's superior mind disqualified her entirely for judgments concerning anyone who didn't compete with her on the intellectual level. She criticized scornfully and recklessly those writers she loved best, Tolstoi and Mann, . . . but any society matron or business executive with the smell of money about them rendered her helpless (38).

Paradoxically, Nadia's freedom, accomplishments, and adventures fail to provide her with the sense of power vested in the role of Mrs. Elwood Everett. Preparing to host a cocktail party, this Nadia

was intoxicated. . . by the mystical sense of her being at last in power, in control, a part of the secret, invisible world that owns and controls everything.

Because Fernwood does control everything, like it or not (56).

Nada's greed for wealth and power is reflected in her voracious appetite for food, which causes her to eat

as if she expected a disembodied hand suddenly to pull her plate away from her, and if it had she would have continued eating, learning over the table until she could

no longer reach the plate (72).

All of her greed--for power, food, and social prominence--is rooted in her childhood, not as Nadia Romanov whose emigré parents "had a minimum of power in their new life" (21), but as Nancy Romanow, a Catholic farm girl from upstate New York, whose simple immigrant parents probably had a minimum of everything. Like Clara Walpole and Jesse Vogel, Nadia has risen, but her rise has simultaneously fragmented her personality and magnified her mania for power to grotesque proportions. The young Nancy who sought in New York City "the darkness" of "a rebirth and rebaptizing" (250) was indeed reborn, but only to another death-in-life. Her desire for freedom and power ultimately reduces her to a slave to her appetites and, as her son observes, drains her of all reality:

Every word of hers, every gesture, was phony as hell, and as time passed in Fernwood this phoniness grew upon her steadily like the layers of fat I have encircling my body (67).

Nadia has sold, not freed herself, and with grotesque results. Her search for power, instead of leading her to the liberating pursuit of an artistic career, transforms her into a suburban housewife, effecting what Wegs terms "a grotesque metamorphosis."⁶⁴ Thus Nadia, whose potential was so great, bows to the demands of poor Nancy Romanow, who craves the finery of Mrs. Elwood Everett. Instead of attempting to integrate these divergent facets of her personality, she suppresses Nadia to please the "kindly" people of Fernwood:

If these people ever mentioned her writing she would raise

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 161.

one lovely shoulder and smile and change the subject at once. She wanted nothing so much as to grovel and annihilate herself before these people, the only people in the world she could not imitate. The most ignorant, the most self-complacent, ugliest dowager of them all bowled Nada over simply because --guess why!--she had never read Thomas Mann, had never heard the name, and gave not the slightest indication of regretting her loss (56).

As noted beofore, the free-spirited Nadia sometimes breaks through the "layers of phoniness" when, suffocating in the trap of her suburban home, she runs for her life (93-94). It is while she is preparing for another such flight that Richard allegedly shoots her to keep her for his own. As Wegs observes,

Both Richard and Nada have made the leap into absurdity, Nada by choosing the life of suburbia and Richard by killing his mother, but because theirs is not the leap of faith, it becomes a plunge into grotesque death, despair, chaos--nothingness.⁶⁵

After her death, Nadia, Nancy, and Mrs. Everett take up residence in Richard's already splintered brain, where she becomes Nada. Richard explains how

she passed over from being another person into being part of myself. It was as if Nada, my mother, had become a kind of embryonic creature stuck in my body, not in a womb maybe but a part of my brain. How can you describe a creature that is lodged forever in your brain? It's all impossible, a mess. . . (94).

But, as Richard admits, he was "a mess" long before Nada moved in:

It was in Fernwood that I began to disintegrate as a child. You people who have survived childhood don't remember any longer what it was like. You think children are whole, uncomplicated creatures, and if you split them in two with a handy ax there would be all one substance inside, hard candy. But it isn't hard candy so much as a hopeless seething lava of all kinds of things, a turmoil, a mess. And once the child starts thinking about this mess he begins to disintegrate as a child and turns into something else--an adult, an animal (29).

⁶⁵Ibid.

Richard, imprisoned by the all too solid flesh of his overgrown animal body and by the slender but strong thread that binds him to reality, longs for the release of total breakdown, through which he can escape suffocating sanity and achieve total freedom. As he explains,

. . . . I am glass, transparent and breakable as glass, but--and this is the tragedy--we who are made of glass may crack into millions of jigsaw-puzzle pieces but we do not fall apart. Instead we keep lumbering around and talking. We want nothing more than to fall apart, to disintegrate, to be released into a shower of slivers and have done with it all, but the moment is hard to come by. . . (186).

Exorcising both of his parents from his soul is one means by which Richard hopes to achieve disintegration. Reading Nada's stories on furtive trips to the library provides some release until the hoped-for disintegration finally occurs when he reads "Nada's" "the Molesters:" "I felt uncanny. The air seemed to be rocking about me. I hurried. . . and waited in terror for something to happen" (179-80). He resolves to protect himself from his molesters, the adults all about him, by purchasing a gun, the same weapon with which he allegedly shoots Nada.

Richard marvels at the power of words, a power which finally frees him of the pain of being sane:

There are some of us, sick people and madmen, who should not be shown symbolic matter. Pictures, designs, words, are too much for us. We fall into them and never hit the bottom; it's like falling and falling into one of your own dreams. We make too much of things, we sick people and madmen. Words mean too much to us. You think only food excites me. . .? (181)

It is highly ironic that Richard completes his disintegration and achieves his dubious freedom in such an effortless manner. Earlier, he had fought madness with a vengeance, literally wracking his brains in an effort to win Nada for himself by meeting her rigorous intellectual

standards. After hours of a gruelling entrance exam at the exclusive Johns Behemoth, Richard nobly fights his impending breakdown:

I felt as if I were trying to fly with wings soaked in sweat, feathers torn and ragged, falling out, and on my shoulders Nada rode with triumphant, impatient enthusiasm, her high heels spurs in my ribs--me, the child, the shabby angel pumping his wings furiously and weeping with shame; Nada, the mother, digging in her heels and cursing me on. I kept struggling up into the sky, my eyes bloodshot and my heart just ordinarily shot, waiting for the end. . . (48).

His body loses control first and when he vomits "a big, hot steaming mass of slop," instinctively rejecting Nada's "lovely mother's breakfast for her son" (47), his even more spectacular departure from Johns Behemoth is foreshadowed. Not content with merely defacing the Record Room, the sanctuary for test scores, Richard performs

the best and happiest trick of all: I was vomiting over everything, summoning up from my depths the most vile streams of fluid that ever graced any Record Room in history (111).

This episode is central to the regurgitating motion and metaphor of the novel which its narrator views as mere "excrement" (87). Richard describes how he is "sinking into a slough of food" (227) which he devours not for pleasure but as "bulk to induce sleep and peace, nothing more. I am going to eat my way out of this life, like Nada's noble kinsman" (181), who literally burst his stomach by "eating his way through a roomful of food" (31).

Although Richard's appetite seems at first to originate in some alien force, "as if someone else had charge of my stomach" (149), it ultimately frees him, ironically fulfilling Nada's deepest wish for him: "'I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it!'" As he observes, "Well, yes, I do stink. And I am free also" (207).

As he concludes his massive exercise in excrement and exorcism, Richard prepares for death:

And here are eight bananas, just flecked with brown and therefore ready to be guzzled, and as soon as you turn your back I will begin. The softness of bananas, the hardness of peanut brittle, the pliant cool sanity of lettuce! I have sauces and jams which I will pour over those pieces of bread and those cookies which have gone stale, never fear. This must be the end of the memoir. . . . I am being carried along on the wave of a most prodigious hunger. All I ask is the strength to fill the emptiness inside me, to stuff it once and for all (255).

Vomit and gluttony are appropriate motifs in a novel which satirizes the excesses of suburbia. As Sanford Pinsker observes, "The two-hundred-and-fifty-pound Richard Everett epitomizes suburban affluence in its boldest, most grotesque relief."⁶⁶ Although Richard vehemently protests that no irony is intended in his encomium of the paradise of suburbia (122-23), he protests too much. Viewed as a whole, the novel is also his attempt to purge himself of the lushness of manmade paradise. He recalls the lawns of Fernwood, associating them with "fresh, crisp cash. Bills you could stuff in your mouth and chew away at" (33).

Oates's use of religious imagery in descriptions of suburbia is grotesquely inverted in the method similar to that which she utilized in With Shuddering Fall and A Garden of Earthly Delights. As Wegs observes,

Oates's use of debased religious images to describe the life in the paradise of the suburbs, where the official religion

⁶⁶Sanford Pinsker, "Suburban Molesters: Joyce Carol Oates's Expensive People," Midwest Quarterly 19 (Autumn 1977): 89-103.

is materialism, serves to emphasize the spiritual poverty of those who dwell there. The combination of the sacred and the profane produces a grotesque satire.⁶⁷

Thus, one cannot quite believe Richard is sincere when he gushes:

ah, to tell you of these things would be to write another Paradiso, and we writers are better equipped to write of the Inferno and Purgatory, as you know. Before the rare beauties of the wealth of America a writer can do nothing--his criticisms: are just envy and everyone knows it. . . .

If God remakes Paradise it will be in the image of Fernwood, for Fernwood is Paradise constructed to answer all desires before they are even felt. . . .

Fernwood is an angel's breath from heaven. It is as real as any dream, more real than a nightmare, terribly real, heavily real, as real as our neighbor's lovely Borzoi dog leaping onto your chest or Nada's grand piano sliding onto your toe. Fernwood is Paradise and it is real! . . . no other society, no other world, is quite equal to it (121-23).

The reality of suburban natives is highly questionable, however.

As Richard early learns about his dog(s), Spark and the ubiquitous Edward Griggs, suburbanites are easily duplicated, cloned, or interchanged. In addition to this "radical interchangeability"⁶⁸ of dogs and people, a form of intensified doubling, the grotesque impact of suburbia is heightened by Richard's view of it as a dream. Although not a nightmare, it imposes an imprisoning lack of consciousness. As he explains,

Fernwood, itself was a dream, and everyone in it dreaming the dream: all in conjunction, happy, so long as no one woke up. If one sleeper awakened, everything would have been stretched and jerked out of focus, and so. . . the end of Fernwood, the end of Western civilization! (142)

When Richard awakens, he glimpses the void beneath the lush

⁶⁷Wegs, p. 148

⁶⁸Pinsker, p. 99.

landscape: "all of Fernwood is kind, nice, generous, lovely, and it means nothing, nothing" (120). Totally conscious, he views suburbia as an estranged world and takes refuge in the safety of madness:

something happened to me. It was like a bolt of lightning (that marvelous metaphor!) that flashed down upon me and would have split my skull in two except for my knowing enough to bend with the blow.

Some safety device in my brain melted away and let all of paradise rush loose. . . . this flash of lightning freed me (217).

Emerging from the paralyzing sleep of suburbia, Richard, in a parody of his father's massacre of the chipmunks, enflamed by a rage like that which provoked his destruction of the Record Room, destroys one of the town's "sacred" flowerbeds:

An overpowering fury rose in me, and I jumped into the flowerbed so neatly kept up by the bank, . . . and began kicking at them. I kicked violently, madly, and as I kicked their tiny faces a feeling of soaring happiness filled my hollow little chest. . . . I was lying in the flowerbed, groveling around and still kicking, fighting, scratching, even tearing with my teeth, the fury let loose in my body ringing in every muscle and giving me that holy strength that was not truly mine (218).

Although Nada, in her fragmentation and obsessions, and Richard, in his madness and greater obsessions, embody the grotesque, they are not the only grotesque inhabitants of Oates's suburbia. Wegs dismisses the good people of Fernwood and Cedar Grove as "caricatured distortions"⁶⁹ but one would be more likely to regard them as fairly realistic portraits. The alcoholic Bébé Hofstadter is, as her name indicates, "doll-like" (53) in her layers of clothing, scent, and other accoutrements of suburbia. Richard observes, in a somewhat grotesque simile,

⁶⁹Wegs, p. 138.

that she "looked as if she might come off in peelings with her clothes" (208). Like her real life counterparts, Mrs. Hofstadter is so imprisoned in the armor of her role that any development beyond her stunted baby-doll status is impossible. As Richard observes, "women like her are perenially about to age but never quite do, they're always at the distance no matter how close, etc." (61)

If suburban matrons do not age, their children more than make up for it. One of Nada's literary lovers complains about the "type-cast, healthy, well-fed tanned children with no sufferings, no thoughts, children out of a Walt Disney musical!" (200); but Richard and his friends, "obviously children who had never been childish or even especially young" (129) invalidate this stereotype. Richard and Gustave Hofstadter, who seems more fatherly caretaker than son to Bébé, play chess as they live--"seriously and silently, like two little old men in a terminal ward of a hospital" (68)⁷⁰

Johns Behemoth is a veritable madhouse, inhabited by such unforgettable inmates as the pedigreed Farley Weatherun, whom Richard describes as

the first alcoholic I had ever met, and he was only thirteen. It was a surprise to me at that time, though very shortly I was to encounter Blazes Jones, a dazed, moony child of twelve who not only drank secretly but went around humming and muttering under his breath and making pawing motions in the air (70).

⁷⁰Oates explores the miseries of the curiously unchildish suburban youth in a number of her short stories, including "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again," "Boy and Girl," "Stalking," and "Free."

"'They're all trying to kill us, it's nothing personal,'"

Richard explains to his friends (129), and, mad as he is, he may not be far from the truth. Just as the children of poor families in A Garden of Earthly Delights and them age and die before their time because of their parent's poverty, the wealthy brats of Expensive People are born old and deprived of souls before they reach their teens. When Richard imagines that Nada is "chewing on" him (66), he expresses a fear he shares with Hilda Pedersen and Shelly Vogel of Wonderland.⁷¹ Pampered offspring of power-hungry fathers, both girls fear they will be eaten alive.

In a sense, Richard has been eaten alive by Nada, but by killing, re-creating, and finally regurgitating her in his memoir-suicide note, he simultaneously achieves his revenge and provides Oates with an effective vehicle through which she realizes a major aim of her fiction, to highlight the contemporary American obsessive "confusion of love and money. . . a demonic urge I sense all around me, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide, the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender."⁷²

Before returning to suburbia for further explorations of its nightmarish landscape in Wonderland, Oates completes her family trilogy with them, the painfully probing picture of ghetto life, which will be treated in the following chapter.

⁷¹Wonderland, pp. 141, 161.

⁷²"Remarks by Joyce Carol Oates Accepting the National Book Award in Fiction for them," in Grant, p. 164.

CHAPTER V

them: THE ESTRANGED WORLD OF THE DETROIT GHETTO

them, Oates's fourth novel and the third in her family trilogy, comes close to fulfilling what she describes as her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book."⁷³ In tracing the assorted catastrophes that befall a working-class family from 1937 through the late 1960's, Oates presents, in a contemporary Book of Job, a disintegrating world which even she, at times, confesses is too strange to be real. In her introduction, she prepares the reader for this estranged world. She recalls her initial reaction to the story told to her by "Maureen Wendall," her perhaps fictional student in the night school at University of Detroit:

My initial feeling about her life was, "This must be fiction, this can't all be real!" My more permanent feeling was, "'This is the only kind of fiction that is real.'" (5)

To persuade us that her mirroring of an "outer reality" which seems "a grotesque invention"⁷⁴ is not at all exaggerated, Oates claims that she understated "the various sordid and shocking events of slum life . . . mainly because of my fear that too much reality would become unbearable." (6)

⁷³Clemons, p. 72.

⁷⁴Tanner, p. 296.

Perhaps such a preface seemed necessary in 1969 but the ensuing years have shown that madness, alcoholism, murder, rape, prostitution, nearly fatal child abuse, and compulsive overeating, all of which befall the Wendalls, are understatements of a far more hideous reality. Philip Roth suggests that our world is too much:

the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination.⁷⁵

If contemporary Americans feel reality is unreal, the Wendalls cannot even grasp the reality of their own being: Jules feels "he could not bear the consequences of real life; he was not a character in 'real life'" (354). His sister, Maureen, at first seeks refuge from the squalor of her life in Austen's novels:

she was pleased, startled, excited to know that this was real: the world of this novel was real. Her own life, up over Elson's Drugs or back on Labrosse, could not be real. The birdlike chatter of her mother, Betty's grunts and bad temper, the glimpse Maureen had to content herself with of Jules out on the street were not so real as novels, not so convincing. (166)

After a few years, however, Maureen can no longer "dissolve into nothing, nobody, an eye in a head, a blankness" (160) by reading a novel. Reality, the surrealistic reality of the Detroit ghetto, explodes to render fiction impotent, incomprehensible. As Maureen writes to Oates of Madame Bovary, long after she has recovered from her adolescent bookish craze, "This is not important, none of this is real" (312). Failing English because, like the shell-shocked Vale Bartlett

⁷⁵Roth, p. 224.

in Childwold, she cannot write coherently, Maureen claims not to know what form means. Neither literature nor life possesses it: "there is no form to it. No shape" (320), she writes.

Viewed as a whole, them also seems chaotic, formless, and shapeless but, unlike such later works as The Assassins, Childwold, and Son of the Morning, it follows a straight chronology, unfolding without any design other than the piling of one atrocity atop another. On closer examination, however, it does "give a shape to so much" of the "pain" (320) endured by the Wendalls. Like their pain, them follows a cyclic pattern. In the first pages, Loretta, both mother and daughter of sorrow, recalls how the Depression unleashed a demonic force, leaving her father paralyzed, terrified, unable to "make sense of his terror" (18) without the anesthetizing effects of alcohol. Maureen's unborn child appears in the last, a child doomed to the same cycle of poverty, impotence, and violence endured by its forefathers.

Their sorrows are heavy, but not particularly noble or ennobling. How so much misery can creep into their lives is "mysterious" to Jules, who "wondered why mystery was cast in the forms of such diminished people" (251). It is just this diminished quality, the impotence bred of poverty, which renders the Wendalls a fertile breeding ground for the grotesque. As Grant observes,

A debilitating sense of entrapment paralyzes the characters. Despite the irrepressible need to put life in order, any effort to do so ultimately produces only a house of cards: their lives defy ordering. A malignant fate erodes their efforts, and every new crisis only triggers a more violent response.⁷⁶

⁷⁶Grant, p. 53.

As in the case of the dispossessed Nancy Romanow in Expensive People and the Walpoles in A Garden of Earthly Delights, the desires for freedom, stability, and power, normal in Loretta, are magnified to grotesque proportions in her children, Jules and Maureen. Thus, although the people may diminish over generations, their grotesquerie is magnified. The Wendalls' exaggerated response to the distorting conditions of their lives ultimately leads to madness and fragmentation, while their incessant quest for autonomy enslaves them, depriving them of what little freedom they ever enjoyed.

Joyce Wegs applies Tanner's terms of fixity and flow to Jules and Maureen, claiming that their "loss of humanity" is due to their extreme behavior:

Maureen characterizes the grotesqueness which comes from a search for rigidity and permanence while Jules illustrates the grotesqueness of a search for freedom which approaches absolute flow.⁷⁷

These observations are quite valid but fail to consider all of the opposing forces which render Jules and Maureen grotesque. Jules's conception of himself as a pure spirit and Maureen's conception of herself as mere flesh, along with their extremes of fluidity and fixity, seem to suggest that each is but a fragment; neither one is whole. An examination of their mother, Loretta, in whom flesh and spirit coexist and the desires for freedom and permanence contend on a normal level,

⁷⁷Wegs, pp. 172, 179. She sums up her view of the grotesque plot of them as a reduction to chaos: "Everything from religion to law, fiction, love and marriage, and money is revealed to be unreliable" for the Wendalls, through whom Oates dramatizes "the inadequacy of the values and ideals of contemporary Americans to deal with a fragmented and chaotic world" (pp. 164-65).

precedes separate considerations of her fragmented offspring and provides a touchstone against which their grotesquerie can be contrasted.

II

Because Loretta Botsford Wendall Furlong endures repeated assaults against herself and her family without disintegrating, she holds a unique position in Oates's gallery. As Grant explains, Loretta, unlike Clara, Karen, or numerous others

cannot be broken--not by the murder of her lover beside her in bed, not by her rape by the policeman investigating the murder, not by her children, not by the urban riots--nothing destroys Loretta.⁷⁸

A part of what keeps Loretta from disintegrating is her "flowsy" quality. Wegs observes that unless it is a misprint, "this coined word seems to suggest . . . a sense of Loretta's infinite adjustability."⁷⁹ Unlike Jesse of Wonderland, who is destroyed by his ability to adapt, Loretta finds in hers the key to survival. Barely seventeen years old when she is forced to leave the familiarity of an urban slum for the isolation of a rundown farm and oppressed by a domineering mother-in-law, Loretta senses that she can survive, that "this personal, private, nameless kernel of the self could neither be broken nor escaped from . . . "(56). This sense of unbreakability and permanence strengthens Loretta as she lives from one crisis to another.

Because the conflicting desires of spirit and flesh are fairly

⁷⁸Grant, p. 25.

⁷⁹Wegs, p. 232, n. 62.

well-balanced in Loretta, she, unlike her children and other grotesque Oates characters, does not "go over the edge" when she lies with her young lover. Too solidly encased in her body and its wholly normal desires to disappear, Loretta reflects on the impermanence of the flesh in an explicit foreshadowing of the evening's events, wishing she had witnessed John Dillinger's shooting, so she would have been able

to kneel in the blood and bring it back home in triumph, because there wasn't much else to remember a man by except something raw and ugly, and that blood had been real enough in him, warm and coursing through his veins until some policeman's bullet let it loose (26-27).

This awareness of the impermanence and vulnerability of the flesh strengthens her when she awakens the next morning in something approaching an estranged world: drenched with her lover's blood, still lying beside his dead body, she feels that

all his flesh had turned to poison. What had been so hot and sweet earlier that night was not heavy with death, and the fact that death had come so fast and without any struggle showed how little you could trust the body, even the body of a man, arms and legs and chest and belly, all of it useless (30-31).

Momentarily deranged by the horror of the discovery, Loretta wonders:

. . . And what if she went crazy? Her mother had gone crazy, screaming her hopeless mad scream, weeping for hours, for days, lying in her soiled bed, crying that her head was splitting in two. Loretta had seen other crazy people, had seen how fast they changed into being crazy. No one could tell how fast that change might come (31).

In its characteristic fashion, however, Loretta's spirit draws strength from her body. In this case, by passive acceptance of Officer Wendall's advances, she insures her future. When she reappears in the next chapter, the pregnant Loretta is "a different person," one who enjoys "the sweet, slumbrous density of her married life, for which she had even

been given a new body" (43). When life on the farm with her in-laws became oppressive, the physicality of baby Jules and another pregnancy "kept her sane" (58).

All her life, Loretta longs to be "fixed and settled, good" (46) but repeatedly finds that "nothing was permanent. . . . nothing had fixed her" (63). Because her desire for permanence is not as obsessive as her daughter's, however, Loretta is not destroyed or rendered grotesque by it. "'My life is a joke and I can't even get a laugh out of it!'" (302), she complains, depressed by the death of her first husband and the incarceration of her second after he beats her daughter almost fatally. "Flowzy" as she is, Loretta survives these and worse disasters.

At times, her starving spirit rebels against the oppressive physical realities that surround her but even her desire for freedom is merely a plea for permanence. Sensing that there must be something more to life than an incessant cycle of crises and adjustments, she cries:

"Christ! I'm sick of all this. I want to be like people in that movie, I want to know what I'm doing, I don't want to be shoved this way then that way. Now, if we got to move out of this house like somebody was saying, if they want to fix the street, now, now that's what drives me crazy. . . . it drives me crazy the way I always have to move from one place to another . . . all them dumps, them bus rides? I can't stand always moving around! I want my own place, my own house. I want to be like somebody in a movie, I want to get dressed up and walk down the street and know something important will happen. . . I wasn't meant to be like this--I mean, my hair, and I'm too fat. I don't really look like this, I look a different way. And the toilet is bad again. . . . I know who I am--I got a lot of things to do and places to see and this isn't all there is in the world! Not this! Not for me!" (108)

Although the riots displace her from still another home before

the novel ends, Loretta preserves her "kernel of a self" and, in her "flowsy" way, is more admirable than the grotesque Maureen whose desire to be "'a success of a person, something firm and fixed'" (409), destroys more lives than her own. Maureen accuses Loretta of being "'mixed up with dreams. . . . she seems wide awake, she's always going somewhere and she's always ready for a laugh but really her life is all asleep. . .'" (409). In reality, however, the perpetually portable Loretta is more "wide awake" than Maureen. Fully accepting the human condition, Loretta preserves her self by meeting the demands of both spirit and flesh, and thus avoids Maureen's fixation on total fixity or Jules's truly "flowsy" extreme of total flow.

III

Young Jules appears to echo his creator's concept of the demonic when he reflects that

it was. . . possible that he had a devil in him; a devil was to his imagination a kind of persistent failing, a dragging over to one side, as when a car's tires begin to go on one side and drag everything over that way, relentlessly (69).

While his mother integrates the contradictory forces of spirit, flesh, fixity, flow, freedom, and permanence, Jules is driven to satisfy only his spirit, his desire for freedom, for total flow. This "dragging over to one side" has grotesque consequences. Jules imagines that his free spirit renders him indestructible:

Hadn't he escaped from danger all his life? Hadn't his luck bounced him back up to the top, as if he were a rubber ball, all one texture, one foamy, happy, invulnerable, rubbery texture that nothing could kill?

No, of Maureen he would not think, his other darker self,

his sister, lying around in silence, unwashed, drab and coarse-- he could not let himself think of her. . . (248).

Ironically, Maureen, the vegetable, his dark double, is no more grotesque than Jules, whose demon deludes him into feeling that he is

a pure spirit struggling to break free of the morass of the flesh. He thought of himself as spirit struggling with the fleshly earth, the very force of gravity, death. All his life he thought of himself in this way, and only during certain bleak unbelievable periods. . . would he have sighed to himself, My life is a story imagined by a madman!

Of the effort the spirit makes, this is the subject of Jules's story; of its effort to achieve freedom, its breaking out into beauty, in patches perhaps but beauty anyway. . . . (255).

Jules has inherited his mother's "flowsy" tendency and magnified it to such a degree that his adaptability is, in its extremity, second only to Jesse Vogel's. While Jesse's originates in a desire to control his destiny, Jules's originates in his sense of his own unreality. The choice of verbs in the following passage (*italics mine*) underscores his watery, formless spirituality:

he thought of himself as a character in a book being written by himself, a fictional fifteen-year-old with the capacity to become anything, because he was fiction. What couldn't he make out of himself?. . . If he was a character in a book of his own making, why should money hold him back? He would get it and float upon it. . . . slide out from under. . . , agile and shrewd, and float out and away upon the ocean of America, all the way across the Midwestern prairies and the Rockies to the West Coast, where the future of America lay, waiting for people like him. He could change his name. He could change his looks in five minutes. He could change himself to fit into anything (98-99).⁸⁰

He feels compelled to fly away, to "put together some kind of

⁸⁰He expresses a similar view on p. 111: "By himself he was light as air, with all possibilities open before him, just as they were open to the enviable heroes of books and movies."

personality for himself" (284) on another level of existence. His transcendent vehicles, money, cars, and sexual love, replace the Catholicism he rejects in a grotesquely incongruous juxtaposition. As a young boy, Jules longs

. . . not to be a saint exactly but to live a secular life parallel to a sacred life--a modern life, at all costs--to expand Jules out to the limits of his skin and the range of his eyesight. He could do it. He needed only time and some space to move around in. . . . In the United States of America complicated maps are given away at any filling station, just ask for one, all that valuable information given away for nothing--about this world there is much information, mountains of facts and wonders, but about the other world there is nothing, and so Jules detached himself from it without regret. He believed in himself. He did not trust anyone else (95-96).

Jules is so self-sufficient that he feels superior to Jesus Christ and resents the Church's glorification of Him. After leaving it, Jules finds

he did not miss the church, the early Mass, the pictures of Jesus as an adult and as a baby, glorified, bleeding, dying, dead, or risen again, in an ecstasy of power. He had not liked Jesus. . . . He, Jules, would be a better man, or at least a cleverer man--why not all the kingdoms of the earth? Why not? The kingdoms of the earth would only go to someone else; that was history (96).

It is, of course, ludicrous that a high school dropout, petty criminal, and truck driver could feel superior to Christ, just as it is ludicrous that he could imagine that he must "be equal to a supreme Jules, a dictator. . ." (236).

The grotesque impact of Jules's attempt to equal his divine alter ego is heightened by the secular means he chooses to achieve this destiny. During a marathon lovemaking session with Nadine, a session described in mystical terms, Jules feels "as if his brain were infected with the fever that had seared his body, to purify his body" (365).

In a juxtaposition of passion and religion, not unlike Karen's in With Shuddering Fall, the exhausted Jules feels

sodden, satiated with the miracles of his own body. . . lacerated with having lived through so much. His eyes burned with the experience of miracles like the eyes of a Biblical prophet, a bearded, wild-eyed prophet of some nameless desert, wandering through a hot eternity of deserts, flaming bushes, apocalyptic cracking skies, rearing white waters, the purposeful flights of imaginary fabulous birds . . . He was slowly losing his strength, his soul (366).

Jules also strives to attain his divine potential through material wealth. He endows money with sacramental power: "The money he got here and there, secretly, would pile up out of sight and help him transform his life" (111), and when he finally acquires a large amount, he perceives the event in religious terms: "He cast his eyes upward to the golden ceiling of the bank, for a moment confusing it with church, thinking he was somehow in church. . . . the magic moment. . . ." (238)

He finds another source of "sacred" strength in motorized vehicles. As a young boy he envied truck drivers because "in their trucks they were elegant, free, the distance they covered was godly and magical" (97). Even after years of thwarted attempts to free himself of the Detroit ghetto, Jules still endows the automobile with sacred power:

So long as he owned his own car he could always be in control of his fate--he was fated to nothing. He was a true American. His car was like a shell he could maneuver around, at impressive speeds; he was second generation to no one. He was his own ancestors (335).

A large part of Jules's fascination with cars originates in his passion for heading west. A twentieth-century Huckleberry Finn, he longs to strike out for the territory: "He thought of a wilderness, land out West: a golden sky, or perhaps a golden field of wheat. . .

mountains. . . rivers. . . something unmapped" (93). He almost gets there during the twenty-five page interlude with a Dickensian grotesque. Bernard Geffen's double visage recalls the partly decapitated accident victim Jules had viewed with horrified fascination when he was a young child (64):

His forehead, broad and sloping, seemed of paler skin than the rest of his face, skin not just lighter but somehow stretched thinner, of a different texture. It might have been that the upper part of his skull was swelling slowly out of shape. His jowls and jaw were flabby and on his cheeks tiny veins had worked their way to the surface, giving him the flushed surprised look of the many bums and rummies Jules saw every day of his life downtown (231).

When Geffen writes him a check for ten thousand dollars, Jules resists the temptation to "take off for California" (234) with it. Even after Geffen's sudden, grisly death, when Jules could easily escape with money now rightfully his own, he restores it to Geffen's corpse, staring at the "blood smeared onto the eyeball of one eye" (245). Determined to mold his own destiny, Jules hesitates to lock himself into a life of crime by fleeing to California under suspicious circumstances.

As Jules reflects a few weeks later, he is "still free" but is tormented by "the sour, foul stench of failure, of the foul, dark joke of a world in which he had lived all his life and might never escape" (248-49). With the transforming powers of money and cars beyond his grasp, Jules fastens onto a woman as his last hope for liberation. Although Geffen's money and car could more easily have been Jules's for the taking, he singles out the dead man's niece, a Grosse Pointe socialite, for his grand passion. Nadine, "a kind of grotesque Venus,

representative of a distorted love,"⁸¹ calls forth Jules's personal "devil," the throbbing underside of his spirituality, and drives him past the boundaries of sanity into the void of madness. Frequent allusions to insanity prepare the reader to accept the fact that

the two of them were fated for some final convulsion, locked in each other's arms, their mouths fastened greedily together in a pose neither had really chosen--like gargoyles hacked together out of rock, freaks of mossy rock (342).⁸²

When Nadine appears, Oates observes that "Jules's fate was to fall again and again into astonishing shrill spaces of craziness, all of it overdone physically and aborted spiritually, but somehow logical" (255-56). His love for Nadine seems spiritually abortive from the start, not merely because it is a purely physical passion, but because it is a sickness which transforms him into a madman. As Jules demonstrates,

love, being a delirium and a pathological condition, makes of the lover a crazed man; his blood leaps with bacteria that shoot the temperature up toward death. The real Jules, a cunning boy with a sweet look about him, was drenched and overcome by the sweat of the crazed Jules, a Jules in love (256).

No longer the brave molder of his own destiny, Jules becomes

⁸¹Wegs, p. 185.

⁸²Sullivan's observation of the peculiar relationship between Jules and Nadine seems worth sharing at this point;

Perhaps I have read too much of Miss Oates in too short a period of time, but I do get a terrible sense of futility, not to mention deja vu, watching pair after pair of her characters degenerate into insanity and the shedding of blood. (11)

As the following pages indicate, however, Oates prepares the uninitiated reader for their degeneration as skillfully as she fascinates the possibly jaded reader with this incongruous couple. Although most of her lovers do seem to "degenerate into insanity" and/or "the shedding of blood," each pair follows a different downward course, as the Eden County novels demonstrate.

passive "as the act of love itself swept him along and made of him a Jules he would never have imagined himself" (258). When he lies beside Nadine for the first time, Jules senses that he is beginning to disintegrate and feels that he is "on the brink of madness or of some terrible act the other Jules would perform and then withdraw, leaving him behind" (263).

Crazed by this passion, he heads west with Nadine but, pained by "the disintegrating seams of his own mind" (283), he senses that Nadine is taking him over: "How could he stop from changing himself into her?" (283) His body responds to his spirit's outcry in a remarkably unpoetic manner. Wracked by violent diarrhea, perhaps a subconscious effort to purge himself of his passion for Nadine, Jules wonders "What had he wanted from that girl in the other room? What did human beings try to get from each other? He could think of nothing but his foulness" (290-91).

As his illness worsened, his
 brain seemed to float weightlessly loose of his foul body,
 aching to be free of his body, which had become a pit. . .
 a pit in a dungeon, corrupt with evil smells, slime. . . a
 sudden hot flow about his thighs was like a miracle, an outlet
 of pain. The foulness of his body was now outside him, a miracle.
 He lay in the stench and wondered if that was a sign of hope (292).

When he sees Nadine again years later, imagery of the void abounds. Jules feels "as if a door were being opened deep inside him but it was not a true opening, not a true beginning, an opening instead onto nothing" (333). He fears, sitting beside her, that "his own soul would be lost, flowing out of his terror into nothing" (337). In her embrace, "he seemed to be watching himself, Jules, grow smaller and

smaller like a dying light, extinguished in the confusion of her body" (356). Nadine seems to "dislocate him from the world he'd known, throwing him into some queer dimension in which his style of living, his words, his very self had no power" (361).

Throughout their last hours together, Jules senses that he has entered another world, a world in which he no longer exists: "her closeness was uncanny. . . he had no hold on himself, no clear memory of himself" (357). Deprived of selfhood, of personal reality, Jules feels that "there was nothing authentic in his experience; what was his personal history might have been stolen from movies and books, the imaginations of other people" (358-59).

Jules's enslaving demonic passion transforms his free spirit into mere animal flesh but it is Nadine's sudden, unprovoked attack which effects the ultimate dehumanizing transformation. When she turns her gun upon him, "the spirit of the Lord" departs from Jules (380) and when he reappears in the next section, Jules is neither spirit nor flesh but mere object:

For many months he had inhabited a body. . . sewed up, plugged up, maybe stuffed with bloody cotton pads. They had gotten him ready for use again. . . . He'd outlived himself, in a body. He had become a weight, Jules, an object, throwing a shadow uncertainly before itself but taking up no room. . . . (417-18)

Like his Uncle Brock, Jules disappears into Detroit until the riots of 1966 awaken him in a grim, contemporary parody of *Sleeping Beauty*: "the old Jules had not truly died but had only been slumbering, in an enchanted sleep; the spirit of the Lord had not truly departed from him"(461). Still obsessed with "trying to get free. . . out of

other people" (219), Jules revels in the burning of the city which holds so much of his past. When the rubble is cleared away, he departs, elated, for California, proclaiming to Maureen that "'Everything that happened to me before this is nothing--it doesn't exist--my life is only beginning now'" (477).

Although the achievement of his long-desired flight in his own "magic" car may seem heroic, Jules's obsession with building a new life for a new self leaves one with the sense that he cannot return to the human race. Obsessed with freeing himself of other people, from his past, and from his former selves, Jules, like so many of Oates's heroes, disintegrates into the mere idea of freedom.

IV

While Jules imagines that his spirit is so free that he cannot even remember having been a child (88), Maureen is so conscious of her physicality and so greedy for permanence that she cannot forget anything:

My body is like the body of an animal, or one of those things that are just one cell, very tiny, that keep everything in them of all their history and are always the same age. . . the memory is hard in them and it has nothing to do with their brains. I remember. I will live very long and remember (316).

Maureen may remember too well but she is incapable of recounting her experiences in any coherent form: "I wish I could write down my thoughts not in a mess like most of my life but in some order--I want to explain something, I want to get it clear" (309). Instead, like so many of Oates's women, she feels she is doomed to "spend long heavy hours sunk in our bodies, thinking, remembering, dreaming, waiting for something

to come to us and give a shape to so much pain" (320).

Even in her childhood, Maureen's passion for "shape" and "form," for "order," is evident. Seemingly born old, she wonders "Why couldn't people be perfect? Why did they make such mistakes?" (128) She develops an inflexible code by which she survives until the realities of ghetto life shatter it. For years throughout her girlhood,

She tried to be quiet and composed and orderly, and perhaps this irritated people. "Oh, what a fuss you make!" her mother sometimes screamed when Maureen insisted upon counting every stamp in the stamp-redemption book, or inspected dishes to see if they were really clean, or asked if she could wash her hair more than once a week (172).

This passion for order is partly a defense against the chaos that surrounds her and partly a desire for the permanence that forever eludes her mother but that Maureen feels driven to achieve:

. . . she, Maureen, having no hardness to her, crept in silence. . . and waited for the day when everything would be orderly and neat, when she could arrange her life the way she arranged the kitchen after supper, and she too might then be frozen hard, fixed, permanent, beyond their ability to hurt (125).

So fearful is Maureen of change, of being hurt, that she is unable to play: "Around the house or in the presence of other children she never let herself go. . . She didn't 'play'" (128), at least, not in the conventional sense. She entertains herself instead by escaping into novels which she senses are far more real than her own nightmarish life, in which "her mother made those ugly accusations about. . . meeting boys when she should be in school, how could that be real? How could such words be real?" (166)

Maureen is not even sure of her own existence and wonders whether the self her mother accuses may be her true self, "the real Maureen, a

girl who was hypocritical and selfish and sly." (169)

Her most precious defense against the injustice and chaos that threaten to devour her is her post as homeroom secretary. With compulsive accuracy, Maureen records the meaningless minutes of class meetings until one horrible afternoon when the book disappears. Oates has remarked that this loss of the book is "really the worst thing that happened to her in the whole novel,"⁸³ as the description of the event suggests:

It seemed to Maureen that her life was coming undone. The world was opening up to trap her, she was losing her mind, she was coming undone, unfastened. It was like that time her period had begun in school, a hot flow of blood, a terrible sickening surprise yet not really a surprise, and she'd gone to the girls' room and, trembling, nearly in a convulsion, she had tried to fix herself up but hadn't been able to think of what to do, only that blood was coming out of her and would not stop. . . (157).

Order, the principle by which she lives her life, is so elusive, and disorder is so predatory that Maureen's sense of "coming undone" when she loses the book is not surprising. Surveying her life, she wonders "Why? Why? Why was everything so loud and confused? Why was everything ready to fly into pieces?" (178)

Just as Jules imagines that money will propel his "free" spirit to ascend the magical heights of its potential, Maureen senses that it holds her only hope for order and permanence. Her need for money soon replaces her passion for order as her main obsession: "There was something aching behind her eyes that told her she had to get this money, had to get out, never mind where, had to escape" (183). Once a model

⁸³Kuehl, p. 307.

student, inspired by dreams of a productive future, Maureen is now so obsessed with getting money that she can no longer read, or even day-dream of becoming a teacher: "She ransacked her mind but there was nothing in it. Everything was emptied out, exhausted. She might have been inhabiting her mother's body" (182).

Finally, in what Wegs describes as "an inexplicable change, a demonic miracle,"⁸⁴ the girl who hopes to buy order, rightness, and permanence transforms herself into a prostitute in order to gather the fee:

Maureen felt a certain hardness come over her, as if something invisible were blessing her, as if a shell were shaping itself out of her skin. She drew back from the window, thinking it was a draft of cold air. She shivered. Her muscles cringed and then relaxed in acceptance. She felt herself change (184).

Maureen takes to the street, incongruously clad in her Catholic school uniform, and stores her earnings in a poetry book. She dissociates from herself and survives a seemingly endless series of "afternoon delights" by reminding herself that her client "would give her money. That fact kept her from breaking into pieces" (188).

At times, she considers the possibility of being caught and, in a grisly foreshadowing of her nearly-fatal beating, she imagines that her spine is "turning to ice. It felt as if it might break suddenly. And then all the spinal fluid would gush out" (196). She realizes that the money she is risking so much to earn may not even be real and wonders

What would happen if everything broke into pieces? it was queer how you felt, instinctively, that a certain space of time

⁸⁴Wegs, p. 175.

was real and not a dream, and you gave your life to it, all your energy and faith, believing it to be real. But how could you tell what would last and what wouldn't? How could you get hold of something that wouldn't end? . . . Objects disappeared, slipped through cracks, devoured, kicked aside, knocked under the bed or into the trash, lost. Nothing lasted for long (197).

Having given her all to create a sense of order in her squalid life, having sold herself to buy an escape to a better one, Maureen falls apart when her stepfather discovers her. In a painful but stylistically masterful section (199-203), Oates explores Maureen's consciousness which has lost all sense of chronology, form, and order.

In the next section, Jules introduces a new Maureen. Having barely survived Furlong's beating, Maureen lies in a catatonic stupor. Once beautiful, "her face. . . was now gross and blemished; blotches had come out on her forehead and cheeks. On her left cheek was a rash of pimples that was nearly solid" (212). Jules views her with horror and is tempted to holler

Didn't you do it for money? Didn't you? And now you're turning backwards into a saint, a pig of a saint. . . . Her eyes were large and drugged. He could not believe, glancing at this heavy, ugly girl, that she was the same girl who had been his sister (213).

The compulsive eating that transforms Maureen into this "pig of a saint" contrasts sharply with Jules's reaction to his first encounter with sex. While he was wracked with violent diarrhea, a literal gut-rejection of his experiences, Maureen alternately eats and sleeps for thirteen months, seeming more vegetable or parasite than human: "She is hungry, hungry. A terrible hunger rises in her. Food is something to fill up her entire body and keep it heavy and peaceful. Sleep follows" (293).

Besides offering an escape from an unendurable reality, Maureen's

compulsive sleeping seems to be her way of compensating for something she sorely missed as a child when she longed to crawl under the porch "and hide, let her mind go quiet and blank, give herself a good rest so that she could get her life straightened out" (120). When she was younger, she often feared that "something would catch her and hold her back, some snag, some failure to have dreamed her way out of childhood" (165). Thus, in addition to compensating for the many hours of sleep she lost as a child, Maureen's incessant sleep anesthetizes the psychic pain she suffers long after her physical wounds have healed. Totally dissociated from herself, Maureen cannot even see her reflection in a mirror. Just as Jules senses that he is just "a weight. . . an object" after Nadine shoots him, Maureen senses that she is barely human:

Her body has the hopeless feeling of having become weight, a bulk; it has been loved too much, used and used up. It is weak from months of sleep. It has no reflection, no face. A headless body (293).

When Maureen can focus on herself at all, she seems to split in half. One side of her

lies alone, not sleeping and not awake. In her memory is the constant smell of semen and the feel of it, easing out of her body. . . warm from her body. There is so much of it, a flow like the flow of blood, endless. She is paralyzed by it. . . .

The other Maureen is out on the street, swinging her purse. Slits for eyes, a pretty mouth, everything soft. . . (296).

One day from a bus window, she views this other, former self, and "yearns to join that body, get loose, scream with the pain and terror of getting loose. . . ." (298) but she sleeps on until her free-spirited brother's letters finally awaken her. She loses weight, finishes school, and achieves her lifelong dream of "moving out" only to develop a new obsession.

As she confesses in a letter to Oates, her English teacher,
 Everything in me aches for a husband. A house. I carried
 this ache with me all my life, not knowing what it was.
 Everybody is flawed with it, a crack running through
 them. . . (317).

This passion, rooted in her desire for permanence, has a parasitic
 aspect. Instead of pursuing an unmarried man, Maureen deliberately
 steals a father from his wife and three children because she feels that
 the family he must leave for her is just enough--proof
 of what she can do, of her power, proof of his love if
 he comes to love her, a way of closing him off from the
 past and insuring the future (386).

If her desire for permanence guaranteed by marriage to a stable
 breadwinner is passionate, her feelings for the man himself are not.
 After her prostitution and Furlong's beating, it is not surprising that

Toward men she could feel no love, not really. She
 would have a baby with her husband, to make up for the
 absence of love, to locate love, to fix herself in a certain
 place, but she would not really love him (387).

In her final meeting with Jules on the last page of the novel,
 Maureen admits their kinship. Just as he longs to kill the past, she
 longs to obliterate herself and her past for a new life:

"I want it over with, I'm through with it, all I have to
 remember of it is nightmares once in a while. . . . I'm
 going to forget everything and everybody. I'm going to
 have a baby. I'm a different person." (477)

Just as Jules's obsession with freedom cuts him off from humanity,
 Maureen's obsession with permanence alienates her. While he emerges
 as the shadowy embodiment of an idea, however, Maureen emerges as a
 coarsened, parasitic version of Loretta. It is ironic that she imagines
 that

she was not her mother's daughter. She felt an almost physical

revulsion for that kind of woman, Loretta's kind, their hair in curlers and their monkeyish faces set for a good laugh (387).

In some respects, Maureen would have been better off if she had some of her mother's flexibility, spirit, and humanity. In her rigidity and oppressive physicality, Maureen is as grotesque, if not more, than the "spiritual," fluid Jules.

That both of the young Wendalls must desert the human race in order to survive may be Oates's final reply to Maureen's outcry: "How can I live my life if the world is like this? The world can't be lived, no one can live it right. It is out of control, crazy" (310). Although they lose their humanity through a devilish imbalance, this same imbalance also enables them to perform accomplishments that even Oates regards as "marvelous."⁸⁵ Furthermore, as the next chapter will demonstrate, Maureen and Jules do not approach the demonism of Jesse Vogel of Wonderland, whose obsession with control ruins all that he attempts.

⁸⁵"Transformations of Self: An Interview With Joyce Carol Oates," p. 58.

CHAPTER VI

JESSE IN WONDERLAND: THE SHATTERED SELF

Isn't the great lesson of science control? The lessons of homeostasis and cybernetics: control? What else mattered?

If he had control of himself, Jesse Vogel, then nothing else mattered in the universe. (195)

Jesse's obsession with control and the terrifying lack of it which he witnesses during his youth are the major sources of the grotesque in Wonderland. As in so many of Oates's novels, the hero takes a truth unto himself and renders it false, thus estranging his world by invalidating the major principle which had ordered it for him. Jesse, the man "in control" of his life--survivor, savior, doctor, and, perhaps, devil, controls his life by adapting to others around him, adapting so perfectly that he loses all control of his evolving personality.

With many American heroes of the past two decades, Jesse shares the common dread "of being 'taken over' by some external force, of being assimilated into an alien pattern of their choosing, of being 'fixed' in someone else's 'reality picture.'"⁸⁶ The greatest irony of Jesse's situation is the ease with which he adapts himself to other people's

⁸⁶Tanner, p. 109. Although Wonderland appeared in 1971, Olderman's remarks remain relevant: "The fear of losing power over our own lives is one of the main preoccupations of the novel of the sixties, and it seems as if only a superman or Captain Marvel could hold control" (p. 17). Jesse's superhuman aspirations contribute to his grotesque dissolution.

"reality pictures" in the name of controlling his destiny. After examining the protean Jesse, I will explore the other grotesqueries in the novel which, in their incessant assaults on Jesse, precipitate Jesse's mania for control. I will then examine the fragmented structure of the novel as it reflects the fragmented selves of Jesse Harte, who later becomes Jesse Pedersen, who is succeeded by Dr. Jesse Vogel.

I

On December 14, 1939, Jesse Harte is driven home from school by his father and senses the alteration in his universe before he confronts it directly. Like Jesse, himself, the landscape he beholds is vague and formless as he lies helpless before it: "It is all a blur, shapeless, a dimension of fog and space, like the future itself. Jesse stares at it and as he stares he is being driven into it relentlessly" (41). Entering the house to confront the bloody corpses of his family, Jesse survives the blasts of the shotgun that Harte then turns on himself. The massacre leaves a gaping wound where Jesse's personality once was, a pain he must forever control by denying. He reflects years later, "Jesse was a survivor. Jesse did not have a personality. He did not want a personality. His heartbeat told him always: here you are, here is Jesse, a survivor" (323).

In order to continue to survive, however, Jesse must suppress more than his personality: emotions and memories are also dangerous. "Salvation is won only by hoarding the emotions" (236), he resolves, and in order to hoard his emotions, Jesse must excise his memories, estranging whatever self he is from the self he was:

When he began to think of himself, his entire body reacted as if in sudden panic--there were things he must not think, must not contemplate, must not remember. Over the years he developed a studious, grave exterior, a kind of mask that covered not only his face but his entire body, his way of moving and breathing (187).

The mask that covers Jesse, maintained by his rigid control, is not one but many. That his obsession with control gets out of control is the ultimate irony and, as stated before, provides the primary source of the grotesque in this novel. Jesse is so intent on controlling himself that he loses himself. He also loses his humanity:

He felt his body becoming mechanical, predictable, very sane. . . . even his spirit was become automated, mechanized. It worked perfectly for him. He had only to direct it and it responded. It grew wise (191).

According to Kayser, this is one of "the most persistent motifs of the grotesque" in which "we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, their faces frozen into masks." He explains that "the mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it."⁸⁷ Though the transformation of Jesse is more figurative than literal, more spiritual than physical, grotesque impact remains evident.

Early in his adolescence, Jesse develops an incurable fascination with homeostasis:

The living being is stable. It must be so in order not to be destroyed, dissolved, or disintegrated by the colossal forces, often adverse, which surround it. By an apparent contradiction it maintains its stability only if it is excitable and capable of modifying itself according to external stimuli. . . (107).

⁸⁷Kayser, p. 183.

Jesse embraces adaptation as his code of existence, through which he hopes to control his destiny. Like many characters in recent novels, Jesse becomes "a slave" to an unexamined ideal, "to the blind, compulsive forces which are more proper to mechanical instinct than to purposeful humanity."⁸⁸

Without considering the consequences, Jesse blindly adapts himself to those around him, modifying himself "according to external stimuli" and shaping himself to fit their "reality pictures" in order to survive. What survives, however, if it is a self at all, is not a single self. Years later, his wife, Helene, examines scraps of paper which Jesse has covered with numerous faces and nearly a hundred repetitions of the word homeostasis:

"He is a jumble of men. . . . There are many people in him. . . . And he wants more. He wants his daughters, and he wants me. . . I mean he wants us in him. . . . He wants to be us" (422).

As a reviewer more objectively describes Jesse,

He seems to be an uneasy collection of disparate traits acquired from the men who have been most central in his life. He seems, indeed, to crave other people's personalities in much the way the Pedersens craved morphine, whisky and candy.⁸⁹

That Dr. Karl Pedersen, the first great other personality in Jesse's life, makes such a strong impression on the boy that Jesse retains traces of Pedersen's shaping when he reaches middle age is not surprising, considering Jesse's vulnerability and the bombastic

⁸⁸Bryant, p. 74.

⁸⁹R. Z. Sheppard, "Wilder Oates," Review of Wonderland, in Time, 18 October 1971, p. 90.

physician's megalomania. Shortly after adopting him, Dr. Pedersen confides his plans to Jesse:

"I have been calculating for some time, I have been planning, imagining how you will grow up into my place, into my very being. It is a challenge to me, this shaping of you, Jesse. . . . I believe I will succeed with you. . . . Correcting defects of nature, modifying certain freakish twists of fate, has always been my specialty" (98).

Pliable Jesse cooperates, latching onto this surrogate father who seems to promise to correct the lack of control and direction that has previously marred Jesse's life.⁹⁰ Jesse grows through three sizes of clothing in a few months to fit the Pedersen's bigger-than-life mold and he reads as voraciously as he eats, trying to compensate for the intellectual starvation he had suffered in Yewville and at the orphanage. Dr. Pedersen comes to feel closer to Jesse than to his own children and confides his philosophy to the boy:

"To displace God is not easy. To be higher, a higher man, that is not an easy fate. And I believe you will share this fate with me, Jesse. I am certain of it. Once you become the man you are, Jesse, you cannot ever rest, but must prove yourself continually. Again and again. It is the fate of the higher man" (110).

When Mrs. Pedersen later reveals the practical effects of Dr. Pedersen's god complex, one is reminded of Hawthorne's demonic physicians who are similarly obsessed with their pseudo-divinity:

⁹⁰Fatherless Jesse embodies a paradox that preoccupies many American novelists. As Tanner observes,

To be fatherless, even if only symbolically, is to be autonomous, yet at the same time it makes one more exposed to the coercions of environment, and one of the problems of the American hero and writer alike is to mediate between an impossible dream of pure autonomy and an intolerable state of enslavement (p. 435).

Ironically, Jesse's pursuit of the dream enslaves him.

"Once a patient has come to him, he believes the patient is his. He owns the patient, he owns the disease, he owns everything. Just ask him. Not all his patients survive, you know. Ask him about the ones who die. His diagnoses are not always right. The great Dr. Pedersen has made mistakes. But he talks his patients into believing them so that they would rather die than go to another doctor. . . and he watches them die and won't bring in anyone else. . . right until the end he thinks he is right, he's unable to believe that he might be wrong. . . ." (171)

Years later, Jesse, the intern's bedside style is marked by the divine passion to "save them all" but in a divine manner, as "a presence that is invisible, impersonal" (209). "Nobody is going to die tonight. . . . Nobody is going to die. . . ."(302), the refrain to which Jesse pulls himself and his patients through the nights of his internship, is ironically repeated at the end of the novel when he tries to rescue his dying, drug-addicted daughter from a commune in Toronto: "Nobody is going to die tonight. No dying tonight. Not on my hands" (478).

Although Jesse loses the weight that physically linked him to the immense Dr. Pedersen, he never loses his share in the immense ambition to live out the fate of "higher man." Nor does he lose the more subtle patterns the doctor had implanted. Like Dr. Pedersen, he keeps a "Book of Fates," packed with newsclippings of violent, horrible deaths. Even his dealings with his children are marked by Pedersen's influence: "Don't speak that way, Shelley. Speak only in complete sentences. Give us your complete thoughts" (404). His effect on his daughter is curiously like Dr. Pedersen's effect on Hilda, the porcine Pedersen prodigy, who breaks down during a mathematics contest and howls to her father:

"You want to stuff me inside your mouth, I know you! I know

you!" she cries. "You want to press me into a ball and pop me into your mouth, back where I came from! You want to eat us all up!"

"Father wants to kill me. Eat me. . ." (140).

Years later, Jesse's daughter, Shelley, admits to sharing the same fears. In a letter, she compares her father to a vulture: "I dream about you flying in the air around my head, a beak & claws & wings beating. If you would just forget me I could be free" (460). "We were born with the same fear in us, that you would eat us up" (461). That the demented child can so realistically assess her father's insatiable appetite for other people's personalities is typical of Oates's style of irony in which truth is often spoken only by madmen.

For all of Shelley's life, Jesse has been devouring and becoming Dr. Perrault, a surgeon-mentor and godlike predator that Shelley compares to a pelican with "the same mean clever beak and squat body, the way they fly and suddenly dive down into the water for their prey" (490). Although Perrault's predatory drive is not as strong as Peder-sen's, other qualities classify him as demonic, including his icy detachment and his materialistic view of personality as an illusion so "ephemeral that with a tiny pin in my fingers. . . . I can destroy any personality in about thirty seconds, sixty seconds at the most" (336). His theories on the impermanence of the personality provide ironic commentary on Jesse's own constantly evolving, homeostatic non-identity:

"... the personality is not permanent. It's absolutely unstable. Therefore you find yourself working with--you might say experimenting with--a substance you naively believe to be stable, when in reality it is ephemeral" (334-35).

He seems to echo his creator when he explains:

"We each have a hidden obsession, I suppose, a kind of monster

that has made our facial structures what they are on the surface, the facial mask that is our own, uniquely in the universe, and we try to keep this monster secret, except perhaps to ourselves. And some of us never see the monsters in ourselves. . . . " (336)

Because Perrault's monster is also control, Jesse's attraction to him and his blindness to the monsters inhabiting both of them are predictable. He spends his residency "apologizing, trying to apologize, trying to explain, straightening up the disorder that Perrault caused in his demand for absolute order" (322) and he is elated when he realizes that he has finally

inherited all Perrault's likes and dislikes. He slipped into them as he slipped into his hospital clothes, into his gloves and mask, leaving the trembling Jesse outside in the corridor (358).

A soulless automaton, Jesse lets himself be molded in Perrault's image, "A copy of a copy of a human being;" he bears a striking resemblance to Pynchon's Stencil, described by one critic as "the copier of reality rather than reality in itself."⁹¹

As he devours Perrault's "personality," Jesse realizes that he will "be saved" (311) because the essential control will at last be his:

When he operated under Perrault's guidance he felt his own fingers drawing out of himself, his deepest, numbest, least personal self, and out of the older man, power that was pure control, unimagined until this time (314).

That Jesse has become a monster, that in gaining this "pure control" he has abdicated whatever control he ever had over his developing self, is all too apparent. When, in the final lines of the novel, he

⁹¹Bryant, p. 254.

responds to his dying daughter's accusation that he is the devil with "Am I?", one must answer in the affirmative. By losing himself in the identities of men who strive to supplant God, in order to gain the control that obsesses him, Jesse is indeed demonic.

II

From the day Jesse is "driven. . . relentlessly" into the formless future, he suffers a violent series of shocks which, besides precipitating his obsession with control, also provide secondary sources of the grotesque in Wonderland. Finding his family murdered the week before Christmas, escaping death to live a life in death with a resentful grandfather and later, in an orphanage, where his brain retreats "to an area about the size of a walnut" (69), Jesse understandably wishes for more control over the course his life is taking. This possibility is offered by the Pedersen family, who make him so completely their own that only a year after the murder, Jesse has developed a new self, three sizes larger and countless IQ points brighter. Totally dissociated from the Jesse Harte who lay wounded and deserted the Christmas before, he coldly glances at Dr. Pedersen's clipping of the news story about his family's massacre, ". . . a headline that had nothing to do with him and he rejected at once: BOY ELUDES GUN-TOTING FATHER. No, that headline had nothing to do with him" (121).

Although the name of Jesse seems to be his only tie to his previous life, G. F. Waller notes another: "What does, in its sinister pervasiveness, link Jesse's successive worlds, is money. It is the

lack of money that drives his father to murder and suicide;"⁹² or, in terms of this study, it is the lack of control imposed by financial deprivation that causes Harte to destroy himself and his family.

If the Harte's poverty results in an explosive, gothic loss of control, the Pedersen's wealth results in the pure grotesquerie of an equally destructive lack of control. As Waller observes, the family is "a horrifying caricature of affluent consumers."⁹³ This lack of control that Jesse witnesses and later shares manifests itself both in the physical characteristics of the Pedersens and in their addictions and obsessions. Dr. Pedersen, addicted to morphine and obsessed with becoming God, would be well on his way to divinity if size were the only criterion:

A big man, this Dr. Pedersen--an immense torso, an immense stomach that bulged out against the front of his suit coat, straining the material. Enormous thighs. Knees that strained the material of his trousers so tightly it looked as if it might rip. Jesse could not help but stare at the man's large ankles, the size of an ordinary man's knees, swelling out against his black socks (71).

Although the disproportion and exaggeration in Dr. Pedersen's physique and personality place him in a class beyond mere humanity, his son, Frederich, is so grotesquely fat that he seems less than human. So preoccupied with eating and composing music to bother with such minor matters as oral hygiene, Frederich loses several teeth and then his gall bladder, which

⁹²G.F. Waller, "Joyce Carol Oates's Wonderland: An Introduction," Dalhousie Review 54 (Autumn 1974): 483.

⁹³Ibid., p. 484.

had become infected; he had not lost weight but he looked smaller, like a partly-deflated balloon, the skin hanging sullenly and evilly about the sides of his face, down toward his neck, giving him the appearance of an intelligent frog. When he had been admitted to the hospital for the gallbladder operation, it had taken five attendants, so Jesse had heard, to load him onto his bed. . . (148).

His sister, Hilda, a mathematical wizard who cannot control "the blizzard. . . a pyramid, a mountain" of numbers (122) that constantly erupts from her brain, wears a size twenty-three dress and is still growing because her appetite is also uncontrollable, an "elastic, magical emptiness that could never be filled, no matter how much she ate. It was the size of a universe" (131). Like her brother, Hilda is hideous:

fat ugly Hilda. . . her head nodded--yes--her head nodded at the end of its clumsy stem. A head of ordinary size, with a thatch of straw colored, listless hair, still frizzy from a permanent wave given to her the month before. It was strange that her head was of ordinary size. The skull was ordinary but the flesh packed on it was not ordinary. Everything ballooning, Swelling. Bloated (124).

Mrs. Pedersen conspicuously consumes alcohol and whatever else she can force down her yawning gut. Jesse traces her evolution as he glances through an old family album:

Mary Shirer was transformed gradually into Mrs. Pedersen--heavier hips, arms, a face that grew rounder, that grew almost round, a bosom that suddenly billowed out, the breasts like sacks of something soft and protruding, the upper arms fleshing out like sausages, the whole body thickening, growing outward like the trunk of a giant tree, corseted tight and rigid (118).

As Waller points out, the meals at which the Pedersens and their protege bloat themselves to such grotesque proportions seem sacred, "an obscene mock-Eucharist:"⁹⁴

⁹⁴Ibid.

The jaws moved, the teeth ground and ground, there was a coarse, sinewy, dance-like motion to them. It was fascinating, that activity. The lips parted, the mouth opened, something was inserted into the opening, then the jaws began their centuries of instinct, raw instinct, and the food was moistened, ground into pulp, swallowed. It was magic. Around the table, drawn together by this magic, the family sat eating, all of them eating, glowing with the pleasure of eating together, in a kind of communion, their heads bowed as they ate (126).

For a few years, Jesse, too, eats and eats until Mrs. Pedersen's drinking leads to his climactic split with the family. One day he discovers her unconscious body in the bathroom:

She lay naked, on her back. Her skin was stretched and flabby, a terrible sight, her face simply a further expanse of flushed skin, the eyes half-open upon dull moonish eyeballs, the mouth open and gaping. She breathed hoarsely. Her body trembled and shuddered unevenly, in waves, and the perfumed water in the tub behind her shivered as if in sympathy; tiny, almost invisible ripples ran along the floor to the wall. . . .

What an enormous body! Jesse saw that her breasts were swollen, yellowish bulbs of flesh, the nipples raw, a deep red, circled with rows of tiny goose-pimples as if she were very cold, though the upper part of her torso was flushed with a heat rash and her belly and thighs were also flushed. She breathed feverishly, rapidly. Lumps of flesh hung down from her belly onto the floor tile. She was like a ball of warm breathing protoplasm, an air of something fruity, yeasty, sour rising from her--then Jesse saw that she had vomited onto the floor just behind her head, and a narrow line of stale vomit led from her mouth down her neck and shoulder to the floor. . . . That body! That blank, empty, dazed face! The head at the far end of the body seemed too small for it, as if it were an afterthought. So blank, so mottled and curdled a face, it could have been any face at all--it was the body that was important, exaggerated, swollen to the shape of a large oblong box, a rectangle like a barn. Brown frizzy patches of hair. . . . (157-58).

Terrified by the lack of control, the deathly consuming force gone wild in the poor woman, Jesse agrees to rescue her from her demonic husband for the "salvation" of the soul he had so clearly seen in the wallowing, stinking mass on the bathroom floor (165). Before Jesse can face the literal denial of his existence that the enraged Dr.

Pedersen writes after thwarting the rescue attempt, Jesse embarks on his own binge, a final indulgence in instinct before he encases himself beneath the rigid mask of control:

What food! It smelled delicious. With his fingers he picked something up--slivers of chicken, noodles, dark green leaves and a vegetable he couldn't recognize--and began to eat. He would eat only a little. . . . Jesse, ravenously hungry, picked up another handful of food, then another. . . .

He squatted there awkwardly and ate. Might as well eat. His mouth prickled with each handful of food--his tongue seemed to come alive, suddenly muscular. Evidently he had been very hungry and had needed this food. There was something desperate in his throat that urged the food down and demanded more. What if he didn't get enough? His stomach was an enormous open hole, a raw hole, a wound. He had to fill it with food. He had to stuff it. But he could not eat fast enough, and the Chinese food was so delicate, so thin, there was no substance to it He should have bought some hamburgers, some good solid American cheeseburgers from the hotel coffee shop. . . . (181)

Jesse does just that, consuming six hamburgers, three orders of french fries, two cokes, and a milk shake to quiet the "shrill hunger in him that rose like a scream" (182) and to steel himself for Dr. Pedersen's blunt "'You are dead. You do not exist'" (184).

Massive though he is, Jesse Pedersen fades out of existence the minute he reads those words. The Jesse Vogel who appears in the next section is so much in control that only a few years later his throat closes at the very smell of food. He is unable to watch other people eat and he cannot eat in the presence of others. Although the remaining assaults on Jesse's sensitivity to control are not nearly as grotesque as those he suffered at the Pedersen's, they are sufficiently extreme as to imbed the drive for control in Jesse to an obsessive degree. These assaults, alike in their extremity, also share the common thread of physicality, at times intertwining sex and food, at others dealing

with only one aspect of the flesh that Jesse is so intent on controlling to the point of outright denial.

As a medical student in Ann Arbor, Jesse meets Trick Monk, a deranged senior resident whose very face seems grotesque, "larger than an ordinary face, as if it had been stretched, kneaded out of shape, a clown's face, the features meant for a stage and its exaggerating lights" (199). Both eating and sexuality are intertwined in Trick's confession that he helped himself "to a piece of human being":

"Yes, a human being. . . I helped myself. . . . I cut out of a female about your age, Helene, a uterus that was not at all damaged, and I took it home with me in a brown paper bag and kept it in the refrigerator for a while. . . and then I did a very strange thing, I tried to broil it. . . . I wanted to broil it and eat it like chicken, which it resembles to some extent. . . .

"It broiled unevenly. Part of it got burned and part of it was raw. And it didn't taste like chicken" (257).

Almost as horrifying is Jesse's visit to a farm near Ann Arbor, where various atrocious experiments are performed on animals. He is greeted by a girl who brushes a pink strip of something out of her hair, something Jesse later identifies as a piece of intestine.

He marries the frigid Helene, whose aversion to physicality is even more extreme than his own.⁹⁵ Somehow, however, he manages to impregnate her and on the night of his first child's birth, he is not even aware that Helene is in labor. Instead, he is frantically mending a derelict's slashed testicles and reflecting on a female patient from whose vagina he had extracted

⁹⁵Helene will be discussed more fully in Chapter X on the grotesqueries of femininity.

a handful of dark clotted blood and flesh and what looked like large, curved pieces of ordinary glass, probably from a small fruit juice glass. . . .

The woman's screams. Screams.

A fruit-juice glass jammed up toward the womb (296).

Although Jesse cannot consciously acknowledge the horror of the woman's self-mutilation, he dreams of

that fistful of black clotty blood and bright red blood he had hauled out. A broken fruit-juice glass. What a surprise that young woman had given him! Women were always surprises, though; anything could come out of their bodies. . . . (297).

The highlight of Jeanne's birth night is not her birth, nor the spectacular scenes described above. It is Jesse's encounter with his double, a fat psychiatric patient who was a high school teacher "in real life." The man's very existence seems to threaten Dr. Control:

A huge fat man, not much older than Jesse; billows of flesh, flab, blubber, a bare wobbling chest smeared with vomit and blood--darting crazy eyes. . . .

He hated fat people. Hated crazy people. . . . he was disturbed by them. . . . This patient was convulsing. Throwing himself around like a small elephant, a small whale. Jesse wondered if he had managed to poison himself somehow, his vomit stank so unnaturally. . . . Ugh, how he hated fat! And such layers of fat! No part of the body was ugly in itself, no face was truly ugly, but such quantities of flesh were hardly physical at all--they were a kind of spiritual obscenity (298-99).

Jesse cannot forget the man because he realizes that somewhere, beneath his own stark cheekbones, lies the potential for the same spiritually obscene lack of control that the fat man embodies:

The man's big straining face remained in his mind. It was almost a human face, yet not quite human. Jesse believed he had a secret face himself, a monstrous face that gave its special cast to his own normal features and that he had to fight, to hold back. He had never really seen this secret face of his. That monstrous fat man had shown his true face. . . . How close they had been, like brothers, like twins! (300)

Jesse is so intent on denying the demands of this carnal,

potentially uncontrollable aspect of his personality, his "secret self," as Dr. Perrault would call it, that, after indulging in his sexual desires, he must mutilate himself in a ritual suicide to purge the last traces of lack of control from his body. When he encounters Reva, whose name suggests dream, he cannot remember where or when they met before but senses "an intimacy between himself and that woman, something that had happened under stress, nagging and unforgettable . . . yet he could not quite remember" (304).

He is in such control of himself, molded in Perrault's image and married to the "crystalline" asexual Helene, that the instinctive sexuality embodied by Reva is beyond his memory. As Waller observes, Jesse's "control of his surroundings defines his essential being--until into his life comes Oates's constant symbol of the frightening yet often saving unpredictability of life--sexual love."⁹⁶

He pursues her to Wisconsin, intent on "saving" the unborn child she plans to abort, even though he is not the father. As he approaches Reva's art colony, feeling the "sickness of his bowels, his head, the back of his mouth," (367) he resembles the Jesse Harte he had been years and selves ago. He cannot acknowledge this real, physical, perhaps uncontrollable Jesse, however, and attempts to exorcise him along with fat Jesse Pedersen, whose lives "he was doomed to relive" (361) in a ritual suicide. As Waller observes, "the violence of his past, the violence beneath the perfumed, close-shaven cleanliness of affluent

⁹⁶Waller, p. 487.

America has surfaced,"⁹⁷ but for the first and last time in Jesse.

Not even ten years later, he is in such complete control that he is unable to understand the terror with which his young daughter reacts to the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. She later writes a dreamscape that resembles a grotesque painting of hell:

We are all screaming.

Here in the lobby it makes no difference if you scream out loud or inside. Nobody can hear. The screams rise in a pyramid but still they are silent, caught inside the faces. A current is dragging us all. There is a wind inside this building that lifts us, pushes us back, cuts off our screams, suffocates us, we stampeded back and forth, trapped, and yet we are all free here, nobody knows us, we are all children running loose without adults to hold us back, we see people who look familiar to us like people in a dream, but they turn out to be strangers--(390)

Jesse cannot even consider the meaning of the death of the president because its terror is too threatening: "He would never sleep if he thought about the dead President, about the death of the President, the fact of death." Instead, he considers "Jesse Vogel, who was that?" (397) and feels such a keen sense of loss that the first tears in over twenty years course down his cheeks. Although supposedly "mourning the President," Jesse is really "mourning something else--but he did not know what" (399). His obsessive homeostasis and control have so completely estranged Jesse from whatever his true, authentic self is that he cannot admit that his personal monster has destroyed it.

III

The fragmented quality of Jesse's personality, or personalities,

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 488.

is reflected both in his understanding of literature and in the structure of the novel to which he is central. One of his college instructors has told him:

there was something odd about his understanding of literature--he was unable to follow a plot. . . . He had the idea that what people thought were stories were fragments from shattered wholes, the patterns, the brain waves, of a certain man at a certain time in his life, the record of his controlled and uncontrolled inner life (228-29).

With an identity so totally fragmented by his tendency to blindly adapt to the dominant personalities in his life, it is only appropriate that Jesse, who actually leads so many lives and embodies so many personalities, cannot conceive of a story which is neatly encased in the conventional framework of beginning, middle, and end.

The structure of Wonderland is similarly fragmented. Any one section could stand independently as a shorter work (as some have) because its plot, the development of Jesse, is so fragmentary. Each major portion ends with a mad pursuit to save someone--Mrs. Pedersen, Reva's child, Shelley--and is followed by the death of a Jesse. At the end of the first section, Jesse Pedersen is told that he no longer exists. He ritually kills himself at the end of the second part, "The Finite Passing of an Infinite Passion" when, by resisting Reva he sacrifices "an integrated passional self to the gods of his domestic and scientific wonderlands."⁹⁸ The end of the final section, "Dreaming America," features Jesse's ultimate death and desertion in the first

⁹⁸Fossum, p. 296.

edition. Sailing out onto Lake Ontario with his dying daughter, he panics and loses the control that had dominated him for so long.

Searching the void for the real Jesse, he cries:

"Why are you going away from me, all of you, going away one by one. . . . " Where were they all going, these people who abandoned him?--one by one, going away, abandoning him? Was there a universe of broken people, flung out of their orbits but still living, was there perhaps a Jesse there already in that void, the true, pure, undefiled Jesse, who watched this struggling Jesse with pity?

"All of you. . . everyone. . . all my life, everyone. . . . Always you are going away from me and you don't come back to explain. . . , " Jesse wept.⁹⁹

In this ending of the first edition, Jesse at last confronts the ultimate implication of his mania for control and homeostasis: it has failed him. Devouring her at last, Jesse dies with Shelley.

Oates revised the ending to leave Jesse alive, confronting the demonic aspect of himself when his daughter points it out, yet terribly in love with "this control, this certainty" (478). Whether this revision is an improvement or a flaw is a matter of perspective. Structurally, the death of Jesse at the end of the first version is more appropriate, completing the cycle of deaths that constitute the book. His transformation into a demon at the end of the second, though less structurally justified, is more thematically appropriate because it so strongly emphasizes that it was the truths that made Jesse grotesque.

Two years after Wonderland appeared, Oates condemned it as "an immoral novel. . . which I won't even reread, myself (though I have revised the ending), but other works of mine are simply not so dark, so

⁹⁹Wonderland (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1971), p. 509.

depressing, so joyless. . . .¹⁰⁰ Perhaps Oates is overly self-critical. Wonderland succeeds as moral instruction because Jesse's failure to integrate himself is an admonitory tale on how not to survive, on how an obsessive pursuit of autonomy leads only to fragmentation and, in the end, enslavement.

¹⁰⁰"Transformations of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," Ohio Review 15 (Fall 1973): 58.

CHAPTER VII

SLEEPING BEAUTY: DO WITH ME WHAT YOU WILL

Do With Me What You Will, Oates's sixth novel, lacks the concrete grotesquerie featured in some of her previous novels. There is no Richard Everett to eat himself to death, nor any Pedersens to gorge themselves as part of their daily routine; no Trick Monk horrifies the reader by gobbling a uterus. Although Elena's "sleep" parallels Maureen Wendall's hibernation, it is more figurative than literal.

Even though the grotesque is more cerebral than concrete in Do With Me What You Will, Charles Shapiro, in a 1974 review, considered it her most grotesque novel to date:

In novel after novel, story after story, Oates gives us her own tragic America, a personal vision as perceptive as it is instructive and terrifying. She does not so much preach as show us ourselves on an exaggerated screen. Her damaged women, her haunted men are grotesques. . . . They are as old fashioned as the wild, secretive loners who roamed the streets of Winesburg, Ohio at twilight. But, as with Sherwood Anderson's folk, Oates's swollen characters are relevant to and complement the horror and dangers of our American landscape. The truths of our lives are exhibited in the excesses.¹⁰¹

Through her grotesque motifs of distortion, exaggeration, and fragmentation, Oates magnifies a number of our excesses several degrees, including the tendencies to treat other people as mere property, to

¹⁰¹Charles Shapiro, "Law and Love," Review of Do With Me What You Will, New Republic 27, October 1973, p. 26.

elevate certain professions to divine status, to demand total control over our destinies or to surrender ourselves altogether.

Elena, the "Queen of Sleep," (540) illustrates this last tendency in her unspoken message to the more powerful personalities in her life: "do with me what you will!" Completely passive, totally fluid, this beautiful woman sparks in her parents and in the men who later pursue her, what one character describes as the "selfish acquisition of love, people as property and property that turns into people" (421).

As a young child, she is snatched from a school playground and carted across the country by her alcohol-crazed father who dyes her golden locks black and leaves her in a hotel room to starve. Although she recovers physically and eventually regains her ability to speak, Elena is never quite the same after her cross-country passage. As Shapiro observes, "From then on she denies her own self; she can only exist when manipulated for the good of others."¹⁰²

For the remainder of her childhood, it is solely for her mother's good that Elena exists. She loses what fragments of identity she ever acquired by following her mother's religious devotion to experimentation. As Ardis explains to her daughter,

"We're our own ideas, we make ourselves up; some women let men make them up, invent them, fall in love with them, they're helpless to invent themselves. . . but not me, I'm nobody's idea but my own. I know who I am" (72).

This remark is, of course, ironic, falling from the lips of Ardis Carter who successively reappears as Mrs. Leo Ross, Ardis Carter,

¹⁰²Ibid.

Ardis Karman, Ardis Carter, Marya Sharp, and Mrs. Nigel Stock, whose changes of hair color and facial structure are as frequent as her changes of name.

Although Ardis may not be sure of her own identity, she recognizes the negotiable value of her daughter and further dehumanizes the child by forcing her to work as a fashion model, or, as she describes it, "a little doll" (53).

Dehumanization is also evident in the imagery Ardis applies to Elena. Years after she likens her daughter to dolls, glass, and statues, Elena resurrects the imagery in grotesque fashion. Often warned as a teenager to "take care of that face, carry it like crystal" (79), Elena, years later, imagines a grisly encounter with her lover, in which she is transformed to glass:

You would shatter me if you came to me, if you forced yourself into me.

And then there would be bits and parts, hunks of bleeding flesh, blood smeared on the bedspread and the walls. . . .
(431).

Another of Ardis's images which recurs when Elena matures is that of the statue, which she applies when Elena outgrows the "doll" label:

You are so beautiful, she said, you're at the center of the world. . . . you are at the center of all the adventures, you are what men think about. . . women dream about you. . . about you. Think of the statues, the famous statues made of stone, Elena, think of how perfect they are, the peace in them. . .

I looked down upon my own body and saw that it had gone onto stone, and the folds of my dress had become the creased folds of a gown. Such a body does not even need a head (101).

This statue image reappears years later, when Elena, in the middle of a nervous breakdown, stares at the statue of "The Spirit of Detroit." Feeling one with the stone figure, "she feels very well now, very

happy. . . . beyond anyone's touch" (163).

When Jack Morrissey awakens her from her stony trance, Elena recalls how

I had gone into stone like the statue in front of me: I had gone into peace.

.
Then I came back, I was frightened. . . I. . . I had to be myself again. The other was peace and now I had to live again, I had to come back to myself again in the world and live. . . . (313).

Elena actually seems to regret having returned from stone, having come alive again. As Grant observes, "She has worn so many masks that her real identity has become obscured, and death looks like a long sought-after release."¹⁰³

Related to Elena's stone imagery are the patterns of death and sleep, which dominate Jack Morrissey's version of the same scene. Barely noticing the statue that entrances her, he only sees Elena "gone into stone:"

There she was. And she was waiting for him. But unaware of him. Waiting and yet unaware, asleep on her feet, just standing there on the sidewalk. . . . Her face was whiter than he remembered. It was almost ugly, the skin so drained, so white. Dead-white. Her lips, in that face, looked violet, faintly flesh-toned, like the lips of a corpse. . . . He shuddered, staring at her. He felt almost an aesthetic revulsion, seeing her, she was so extreme; she made him think abruptly of the time he had come to the county morgue to identify a client of his, drowned and fished out of the river and laid onto a porcelain table. . . . (305).

This death and sleep imagery vividly foreshadows the initial role Elena plays in their affair, in which she avoids real passion by her ability to "go distant and safe from him into a nullity she had perfected

¹⁰³Grant, p. 103.

during her many years of marriage" (416).

Nullity, blankness, and, of course, beauty, are the mature Elena's most notable qualities:

She lived in a kind of dimness, a hypnosis of peace, blankness. If she happened to see herself in a mirror she was struck by the vivid not-thereness of her face. . . . the irony of perfect beauty, a substitute for existence (404).

Although the doll has grown, it is little more than an animated statue, a department store window mannikin, grotesque in its lack of feeling, of self, in its substitution of beauty for existence. As Jack fumes,

"You're really dead. You're dead. In yourself you're dead. And you want death for everyone--I can understand that--you're so dead yourself, so frigid, certainly you want the rest of the world to die, don't you? You're such a virgin, a sweet perpetual virgin! You're so perfect that you turn other people hard as ice, like you, and they want to die too--you draw them to you--you draw men to you--and then you feel nothing, nothing! Your insides are as dead as the rest of you, aren't they? You're so pure, such a gift! You are really a corpse! . . . I know--now I know you, now I know how holy you are, how dead and how empty you are, you thing, you dead empty thing--you thing, you thing--" (466)

Although the sleeping beauty is little more than a "thing," its need for a vehicle through which it can feel ultimately binds Elena to Jack: "She could love herself only through him and could know her body only through him" (444). Through Elena's gradual awakening to Jack, Oates dramatically illustrates what she regards as the major point of the novel: "It is only through love that she--or any of us--can break free of the enchantment of the self."¹⁰⁴ After she disintegrates into total insanity and then re-forms into a feeling self, Elena leaves

¹⁰⁴Joyce Carol Oates, Dustjacket of Do With Me What You Will.

her husband and lures Jack away from his wife and young son. The doll-statue-mannikin is transformed into a flesh and blood "criminal, like everyone else" (543), defined by her adultery. Through this crime, she tries to "clear a passageway through the world" (546) by restoring the balance of nature and preying on others as they have so long preyed upon her. By admitting and asserting her power to manipulate others, Elena gives birth to a self that will demand the man she loves. Like Maureen in them, another victim-turned-predator, Elena learns to use others the way they have so long used her.

Early in their affair, Jack tells Elena that she is "the kind of woman men sometimes make mistakes over. . . they get deranged or something" (357). It is ironic that two of the men who "get deranged" over Elena are lawyers, obsessed with controlling, not only their own destinies, but those of their clients. Although Marvin Howe, a famous criminal lawyer, and Jack Morrissey, a dedicated defender of the poor, differ radically in their philosophies, they share more than their passion for control and for Elena. Both are hyperenergetic supermen who need little sleep (121, 183, 365), and inhabit more of an abstract than the concrete world of humanity.

Elena compares the two of them:

Like her lover, he [Howe] dealt with words, terms; his power was the arrangement and rearrangement of words on pieces of paper, a power great enough to control the world; but insane (375).

Although both men are pathologically petrified of women (106, 264), they cannot resist the passive Elena, whom one reviewer calls

a "power vacuum."¹⁰⁵ Each becomes obsessed with her as a possible means of salvation. Morrissey regards her as a shield against the void that haunts him: "All he had to pit against his terror was a woman's body, and it was not a human desire, it was oversized and mad, it could not be endured" (519).

The aging Howe marries seventeen-year-old Elena to save himself from the inevitable. As he explains when she is about to leave him,

"I felt that I might be redeemed, Elena. . . . You came from outside of everything I had experienced and you were so unnaturally beautiful. . . you still are. . . to me you're someone in a vacuum, you're from the outside of everything that's physical and degrading. . . I am a convert to whatever you represent, and all my strength has gone into it, into you; I can't stop my love for you, my belief in you. . . . Because it really is my salvation, my" (553).

Of the two attorneys, Howe is by far the more grotesque. Even his face suggests the demonic character of the mind within. As Elena observes, it

was powerful, as if it were all muscle, tensed and cunning muscle. His skin appeared almost to be multilayered, of different thicknesses. . . . Another face seemed directly beneath the bumpy surface of this face, shadowy and shrewd (112-13).

Gazing at his face beside hers in a mirror, Elena notes that

He seemed a different kind of human being, or a creature who belonged to a species other than Elena's. His skin was remarkably coarse beside hers. But he smiled at her. "Monsters have too much personality. . . ," he said (114).

In several respects, Howe plays beast to Elena's Beauty. He presents her with several homes and warehouses full of furniture,

¹⁰⁵Martha Duffy, "Power Vacuum," Review of Do With Me What You Will, Time 15, October 1973, p. 127.

explaining

"These things were waiting for you for decades. . . .
In fact for centuries. Beautiful things like this are
just in the temporary keeping of ugly people, of ordinary
people--they are really destined for someone like you, for
someone like me to give you" (112).¹⁰⁶

Howe is, indeed, a beast. Although his bizarre daily breakfast of
alternate gulps of bourbon and oatmeal (389) in no way rivals Dr.
Pedersen's monstrous feasts, Howe nevertheless shares both Pedersen's
and Jesse's tendencies to devour people. As he gazes around one of
his warehouses filled with the possessions he has obtained from other
people, he reflects that

A great crowd of people with money and time spent their
lives accumulating these things, and in a way I assimilate
them, their lives, simply by owning their possessions,
whether I bother to look at them or not (115-16).

In a magazine interview, portions of which are appropriately inter-
spersed with Elena's thoughts (Part I, Chapter 12), Howe explains his
appetite for other people:

I've already lived so many lives, I've competed and fought
and struggled and triumphed in so many lives, saving men from
death, from long prison sentences, bringing them back to life
again when everyone else wanted them destroyed. But I re-
fused to let that happen, I refused, I fought to save them
and I won. I won. And so in a sense I have lived a multitude
of lives, burrowed more deeply into certain people than they
did into their own souls, more in control of their destinies
than they were themselves. . . . (121).

¹⁰⁶ Although a full treatment of the fairy tale motifs and their
implications is beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to
note that parallels to Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, and Little
Red Riding Hood are evident in this realistic narrative of a young wo-
man's awakening. In The Users of Enchantment: The Meaning and Impor-
tance of Fairy Tales (New York: Random House, Inc., 1976), Bruno Bettel-
heim explores how these and other fairy tales symbolize children's
psychosexual maturation.

Howe's tendency to control and devour other people is especially evident in his dealings with Elena, for whom he draws up a detailed forty-five clause marriage contract. Furthermore, his sexual style literally drives her to retreat into nullity:

On the first night of their marriage, when he had knelt above her and slowly, cautiously, and then in a kind of angry frenzy made love to her, helpless to control himself, she had lain like this and suddenly she felt herself inside his head, contained by the hard powerful skull, embraced totally, totally. . . . she felt nothing, but drifted like this, absolutely still, gentle, opened to him and empty. . . (119).

Like the demonic physicians in Wonderland, Howe longs to become divine and grasps at the law as his means of achieving it, just as they utilize medicine. As he explains, "the law is what's left of divinity" (124). When he appears before a courtroom audience, Howe imagines that he is apotheosized by the power of his words: "This must be what it is to be divine" (125).

Years later, Jack Morrissey, whose father owed his life to Howe's legal machinations, describes Howe's method:

"he had absorbed us completely, as if he'd created us--like a novelist writing a big crowded novel, with lots of room to keep going and no patience to look back--and no need to look back--and the next day he was gone, he was onto something else" (221).

Traumatized by Howe's seemingly effortless possession of his soul when he took the witness stand at his father's trial, Jack resolves that he will control his own from that point on. Jack, like Jesse, Clara, and Maureen, has only one belief:

in human control and direction, in his own control, in his own powerful will. . . .

And yet. . . in his imagination he could see a kind of control board, with small light bulbs that flashed occasionally

to indicate catastrophes, accidents of annihilation that would be catalogued and assessed as history. . . in fact, made into history and immortality. One of the lights flashes: another inch of the globe gone.

Was anyone working the control board? (277)

Because he seriously doubts that anyone is up there, Jack longs to control the world himself. He often repeats "If I could locate the center of the universe you can be damn certain I'd go there and I'd have perfect leverage there to change everything" (278) By shorting out this powerful, power-hungry side of Jack, "The Self-Starting Self-Stopping Word Machine" (500), Elena saves him from becoming the demagogue of Howe's scale, just as he rescues her from being just one more item in Howe's warehouse of "beautiful things." This humanizing of Elena and Jack marks a departure from Oates's usual grotesque pattern, the pattern traced through Wonderland, A Garden of Earthly Delights, and With Shuddering Fall. In all of those novels, a useful survival method, developed to obsessive proportions, destroys the character it was supposed to save.

Elena's escape from the predators who so long deprived her of autonomy and her liberation from "the enchantment of the self," along with Jack's emergence from his stifling intellectual idealism, constitute more than a love story. Their transcendence of the nightmares of contemporary America fulfills, more than any of her other novels to date, Joyce Carol Oates's ambition: "to dramatize the nightmares of my time and to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷Oates, "New Heaven and Earth," Saturday Review, 4 November 1972, p. 51.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ASSASSINS: A GROTESQUE CATALOGUE

In The Assassins, Joyce Carol Oates vividly traces the decline and fall of a prominent American family by displaying every item in her grotesque catalogue. Distortion in perspective and as process, exaggeration, madness, loss of autonomy, and both literal and figurative dismemberment are central motifs in the novel.

In a radical departure from the traditional narratives of her previous novels, Oates's technique in The Assassins provides three narrators, each of whom speaks from a distorted perspective. The first third of the novel is "thought" to the reader by Hugh Petrie from the iron lung in which he is placed after he shoots himself in the head. Throughout this section, the narrative veers erratically among first, second, and third persons. An anonymous narrator explores Yvonne Petrie's consciousness in the second section, which is as rigidly controlled as the first is metastatic. The final section, in which the anonymous narrator explores the mystical Stephen Petrie's consciousness, is less controlled than Yvonne's section but more controlled than Hugh's. In both the first and third sections, Oates underscores the characters' withdrawal from the external world by dispensing with quotation marks in dialogue.

Although the three narratives deal mainly with the events following the assassination of Andrew Petrie, brother of Hugh and Stephen and

husband of Yvonne, flashbacks to Andrew's life recur. Retelling of Andrew's funeral, Hugh's suicide attempt, and encounters among the three main characters sheds light on the narratives of the other characters. Because of the varying degree of emotional imbalance and unreliability among the main characters, this repetition is essential to our understanding of the novel.

The tale, itself, is a far greater source of the grotesque than its mode of telling. If we consider the obsessions devouring Oates's characters as tools, Kayser offers an appropriate analysis of the estranged worlds that arise from Hugh's dedication to art, Yvonne's mania for self-determination, and Stephen's absorption by God:

The characteristic motifs of the grotesque also include all the tools which unfold a dangerous life of their own. . . .

The mechanical object [or, in Oates, the abstraction] is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks. . . .¹⁰⁸

Metaphorically speaking, Hugh is reduced to less than a puppet when he allows his art to consume him. At one point, he thinks: "Selfless. No self. Art the oblivion of, annihilation of" (43). Hugh's self-reduction through his art begins as playful doodling of caricatures. As Kayser observes,

Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque. Filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter while turning into the grotesque. . . . THE GROTESQUE IS A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD. It may begin in a gay and carefree manner. . . .

¹⁰⁸Kayser, p. 183.

But it may also carry the player away, deprive him of his freedom, and make him afraid of the ghosts which he has so frivolously invoked.¹⁰⁹

Thus, Hugh recoils in fear when he finds a faintly sketched picture of Yvonne among his doodlings: "the deep-set eyes seemed to be staring at me, forcing their angry sorrow upon me as I stood there, a stranger, suddenly frightened at what I had found (43)."

The ultimate transformation of Hugh into a puppet in a world estranged by his fixation on his art is effected when he finds this picture in his apartment:

--a mock-voluptuous female stark naked, with innumerable breasts--dugs--a swollen belly--and eyes so heavily drawn that the pen had jabbed into the paper and ripped it--eyes overlapping--two eyes merged into a single eye--the pupil at the center a tiny pinprick, a hole in the paper--Horrible! Unfathomable!

All this is real, I cried. Real! Real! Nothing else! I am real!--she is real--it is real! Please help me--(171).

Hugh's "it," an alien force perhaps akin to Kayser's ghostly it, has taken over, reversing the relationship between Hugh and his art so that the art, once Hugh's means of mastering life, enslaves him. Although never in close touch with the external world, Hugh is now totally estranged from it. He hysterically denies that he made the drawing and can only blame "it."

Although Hugh is not aware of the dangers involved in his doodling, actually his "playing with the absurd," Dr. Swann, one of his psychiatrists, certainly is. He warns Hugh:

You are small--very small! An infant! the giantess is your

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

own being, your own essence, slipped from your grasp, drawn back into the unconsciousness and now swollen, hideous, ready to devour you--ready to devour your sanity. The art of which you speak so constantly and so coyly--the art you claim as a value--of course you have realized all along that it is an infant's art work--smearing of excrement upon a world others have created it would do you no good to tempt madness, your personality is not strong enough. . . you must live with your impotence (184).

Hugh is forced to live with his impotence: he cannot even succeed at suicide. When he attempts to assert his power over his own life by ending it, his bullet does not quite kill him. A failure in life, Hugh remains a failure in the twilight area between life and death.

As the preceding pages suggest, Hugh's section offers the greatest source of concrete grotesque imagery in the novel. His volume of caricature, Eminent Contemporaries, was lauded as the "Debut of a phenomenally perceptive critic of our grotesque era. . ." (92). Hugh's description of his artistic method certainly indicates that his own creation of the grotesque involves what Jennings would describe as trivializing the demonic:¹¹⁰

I saw through them. I saw. To reduce a man to one or two traits, to twist them into the features of animals--to flatten the complex deceiving contours of the face to two dimensions--icy and illuminated, the cartoonist's art--the moralist's art--puritanical, selfless, dedicated--even at times a little fanatical. . . . I made them appear to be less than human, and therefore ridiculous and killable. Killable because ridiculous--ridiculous because killable (93).

Asserting that murder is essential to his creative process, Hugh concludes:

Most effective of all, whether dealing with an enemy or a

¹¹⁰Jennings, p. 17.

harmless fool: making the face darkly lined, cadaverous. My special touch. All caricaturists distort--exaggerate--make absurd--sometimes playfully, sometimes not. But I hinted at death, I transcribed the beginnings of decay, spiritual rot made visible, exposed. . . . The best way of discrediting someone's ideas is to discredit him--the best way to discredit him is to discredit his life--so limited, so mortal after all. "Death"--so embarrassing! and if made amusing, if made clever-- (94).

As stated before, the art in which Hugh trivializes the demonic is both his means of dealing with and escaping from life. As Hugh admits,

The quick darting movements of my pen had kept Chaos at bay for years: now [after Andrew's death] Chaos began to seep forward, inward. Brute ferocity of life--ungovernable vitality--etc., etc. . . . now beginning to jabber and squeal with delight (95).

In light of this remark, his later hysterical denial of the reality of chaos is ironic. In a drunken frenzy, he raves:

Chaos may be entertained--often is--may be entertained and courted and even taken home--and bedded too (as the case may be)--and chaos may be entertaining--but it is not art and cannot be art--it is an idea--nothing more: an idea and nothing more!--therefore invisible, unprovable, outside experience. It doesn't exist! (174)

By this time, Hugh, almost entirely consumed by his art and the chaos he has so obsessively courted, is on the verge of total disintegration. Drunk most of the time, concerned about his failing vision and health, and depressed by the rejection of some of his most recent caricatures, Hugh admits the absurdity of it all and tries to kill himself, but not without some consciousness of the ludicrous aspect of his situation: "Playful, playful," he reflects as he orders his last lunch, "Nothing melodramatic about it--nothing sentimental or coarse" (207). Projecting a shrill voice into the trout on his dinner plate,

Hugh concludes: "I protest the execrable downward slide of the conditions of life-- . . . The rapid disintegration of values in our--I am a martyr--the first martyr--" (209).

Hugh's final bow as ventriloquist is no less grotesque than an earlier act in which he allowed the ludicrous demon to allay his anxieties at his brother's funeral. "If I stop joking, I stop existing," he protests (25), and is tempted to react outrageously to the threat of non-existence posed by his brother's descending coffin:

I alone among the mourners, I alone among the drawn-faced, sag-mouthed individuals surrounding the grave, I alone was capable of transcending the situation--rising from farce to high comedy--I could project a tiny voice into the pompous coffin--

Help! Let me out!

Sonsabitches!--let me out! (27)

Not until we read Yvonne's and Stephen's accounts of the funeral are we sure that Hugh resisted the temptation.

Both Yvonne and her narrative are imbued with a "glacial, uncanny calm" (266) which initially provides a pleasing antidote to Hugh's uncontrolled raving. As in the case of Jesse of Wonderland and Maureen of them, the tool with which Yvonne controls her world is control itself. In her case, this tool often emerges as imposture and ultimately effects her estrangement from both her self and the world:

Her appearance had nothing to do with her, had no connection with her. It was superficial entirely. The long, thick hair, which could be brushed until it gleamed--the good strong cheekbones--the eyes, the mouth--the strikingly pale skin: all, all were superficial. They did not represent her, in a way they masked her, allowed her to hide quite comfortably inside, somewhere deep inside, cunning and patient. She heard her voice performing when it cared to perform. She witnessed her own behavior from a distance, from a distance inside her, really oblivious to other people. There was a world of strangers,

irrelevant and apart from her, not related at all (280, *italics mine*).

Yvonne's ability to hide inside of herself while an external shell performs has enabled her to raise herself from a high school dropout to the wife of a prominent politician, just as Clara, Nada, and Elena have posed and deceived their way out of obscure, impoverished backgrounds. Yvonne resents the circumstances that force her into masquerade but reflects that: "imposture for its own sake, freely chosen: she delighted in. . . like a child" (281). As long as Yvonne, herself, is in control, imposture only seems to lend her added leverage.

When she realizes that her masquerading is threatening to obliterate her self, she vaguely senses the fate which is about to befall her:

None of them spoke to her, not to her. They did not see her. She was invisible. She did not exist. Had never existed. There was a phantom in her place, a near-transparent being or creature. She watched this creature's presence and felt only a dim, sullen contempt for the masquerade. . . . Where was her life, her self? . . . They had torn her out of it, had ripped her inside out. . . . Someday they would kill her as they had killed Andrew: her face and body brutally assaulted. Torn inside out. Mangled, mutilated (242-43).

Just as Hugh's art ultimately obliterates Hugh, Yvonne's imposture, her method of achieving the self-determination that is so central to her life, finally destroys her. In the end, unknown murderers literally dismember Yvonne just as her passion for control through masquerade has figuratively dismembered her soul. This obliteration of the mortal controller by a greater controlling force, the apparent futility of any attempt at self-determination, the perpetual masquerader's passive acceptance of her ultimate role as a fragmented

collection of body parts--all combine to evoke a nightmare world which ironically originates in Yvonne's obsession with control. As Yvonne and her soulmates, Jesse, Clara, and Maureen all demonstrate, an obsession with preserving autonomy may well deprive us of it.

Although less in touch with the mainstream of life than Yvonne, Stephen Petrie presents, until the final pages of the novel, a world which, estranged though it may be, is still less horrifying than Hugh's or Yvonne's. God "entered " Stephen during his childhood and all but obliterated the boy:

Not existing, not wishing to exist, he lived a life of constant surveillance; his host was Stephen Petrie and he was forced to dwell within that host, sharing a common bloodstream, common organs, a skeleton, a dim reservoir of memories (420).

Like Yvonne, Stephen hides within himself but presents another face to the external world:

that being, to whom they had given a name, was not really him. He was always elsewhere, he was present and yet absent, he was with the others and careful to imitate them and at the same time always apart from them, secret, invulnerable, in that other place, observing himself from a distance. . . . they were not aware of him at all.

The Stephen they recognized was not himself, only a fragment of himself (463-64).

Instead of retreating into nightmare like his brother Hugh, Stephen's retreat is mystical, transcendental, and, perhaps, heavenly. His passion for the God within him has cut him off, not only from the external world, but from the rest of humanity. When Stephen loses touch with God, his tool, his truth, he is left a stranger in our world which, to him, is estranged. He prays for faith

But God had withdrawn. Was coy. Stephen, bereft, muttered

to himself as if to punish God. He was empty, cleansed, weightless, shadowless, totally without sin and without hope. He was ready for God once again but God eluded him (529).

The religion on which Stephen had centered his existence is reduced to an absurdity in a nightmare, in which a voice intones: "I am the way, the tooth, the might" (534) and Stephen awakens, "his brain aching with the new knowledge that, from now on, even God must be repudiated" (535).

There is little doubt of the estranged quality of a world in which the truths of art, self-determination, and religion can turn to falsehood and destroy the people who center their existence around them. From the perspectives of Hugh, devoured by his art, Yvonne, devoured by her mania for self-determination, and Stephen, devoured--but then vomited--by religion, death may seem more desirable than life in a world bereft of ordering principles. As Hugh reflects, "Death, the true goal of our existence, the best friend of mankind. . . . The image of it does not frighten me, but soothes and calms me (369). As in her previous novels, most notably With Shuddering Fall and Wonderland, Oates demonstrates that an obsessive interest in a given truth can enslave and even kill. Art, self-determination, and religion can become destructive and, indeed, demonic forces if allowed to exclude all other truths. Allowed to run wild, they create an estranged world.

The world-estranging obsessions of the three main characters are not the sole sources of the grotesque in The Assassins. In addition to Hugh's descriptions of his paintings and doodlings, there are numerous

instances of concrete grotesque imagery in the novel: the fortyish Petrie cousin, Pamela, who induces vomiting after meals in order to maintain her skeletal proportions; Ezra Pickard, the retardate who is found with a K-Mart bag filled with "expensive junk" once possessed by the late Senator Andrew Petrie; Kevin Kasser, the bald, small-headed, fourteen-year-old, two-hundred-fifty-pound mental patient.

Another concrete grotesque figure, a black drummer, is reminiscent of Gunter Grass's Oskar and inspires horror in Yvonne, who observes:

The child on stage, the black child whose head sank and bounced and rolled--the arms, the jerking legs, the drumsticks held so lightly by the fingers--even the drumsticks were part of his body, and the drums themselves. . . (222).

Yvonne faints in terror and later traces the beginning of her loss of control over her destiny to her encounter with the drummer:

Her mind had worked beautifully, brilliantly. It came alive by solving problems. Now the problems arose but were strangely fragmented--now she could not synthesize them--it had something to do with that black boy's drumming and the hideous loss of her control--the realization, suddenly, that--the deathly certain knowledge that--He [Andrew] would die, and it was not in her power to prevent-- (305)

The remainder of grotesque imagery in the novel falls into Jennings's categories of ludicrous and fearsome. If the demon that urges Hugh to play the clown during his brother's funeral and his own suicide symbolizes the ludicrous aspect of The Assassins, his Angel of Death symbolizes its fearsome side. As Hugh's estrangement from the exterior world increases, as Chaos seeps inward, as his "it" executes hideous drawings on Hugh's board, this Angel of Death assumes more concrete proportions:

Went to the drawing board--saw there a different series of figures--not just the woman but, superimposed upon her, a slim dark angel [Yvonne, perhaps?] --Angel of Death--arms and shoulders and torso quite well-developed, thighs slender as a girl's--enormous intense mad eyes--God's love sustains all human actions--madness of course.

Who has drawn these beasts, who is responsible? (187)

Hugh's final rendering of the Angel of Death is "ludicrous" to him but a bit fearsome to any reader with the vaguest trace of religious sensitivity.

--a copulation-crucifixion, my personal revenge upon the Angel of Death and the Woman--the Angel crucified on a ludicrous fleshy cross--a woman's body upside down--could barely remember having drawn this delicious thing. . . (192).

With the exception of her macabre murder at the end of her section, Yvonne's examples of the fearsome grotesque are confined to the more abstract end of the spectrum. Taken directly from the views of the late Andrew Petrie, Yvonne's ideals, if practiced on a wide-spread basis, could truly estrange our world. Yvonne adopts as her own the principle upon which Andrew had hoped to found an empire:

People must be protected from one another--there must be governmental force--not only the threat of violence but its performance, its regular, even routine performance--there must be control--organization no exceptions, no room for emotion--no meddling by the well-intentioned--those educated people who were infatuated with the sound of their own words, but who knew nothing of life (295).

Yvonne's mania for control has been explored in the preceding pages but her denial of love, her lack of emotion, and her estrangement from her own body, fearsome as they are, and suggested in the previous quotation, deserve some mention here. After Andrew's death, Yvonne systematically takes his relatives and former associates to her bed, but on a purely physical basis. Because love does not exist for

Yvonne, it is not surprising that she is able to accommodate herself to a new selection of mates so soon after her husband's death. That she reacts to his death at all is surprising, but her reaction is physical, involuntary, and grotesquely illustrates her estrangement from her self:

The bleeding had started again according to some erratic rhythm. It had gone on, last time, for seven or eight days. Then, the other night, it had started again, accompanied by unusually severe cramps, which Yvonne did not recognize as a problem belonging to her. . . . But it was not her problem, nothing of hers: it was peripheral to her being and insignificant and embarrassing (349).

She later compares Andrew's death to this abnormal bleeding, reflecting that

the shadow of his death [is] now inconsequential, or, at the most no more than a puddle at her feet. It had filled her womb for a while, that dark thick clotted shadow, but she had triumphed over it--had expelled it from her. It had clamped itself inside her, wanting to eat her alive, but she had expelled it and it had run down her legs, streams of dark shadowy blood, helpless, inconsequential (408-09).

That Yvonne's buried, unacknowledge grief cracks her iron control by taking the form of the physical symptoms of abortion or miscarriage is appropriate in the grotesque schema in which Yvonne operates.

Oates provides one grotesque image that epitomizes the concerns of the novel and of America, itself: the unfinished manuscript of the late Senator Andrew Petrie, entitled The United States of America: The Experiment That Failed. "These pages, some forty or fifty, were badly wrinkled, a few of them ripped, several splattered with blood and now dried stiff, like parchment" (250).

This brief description, considered in the light of the novel as a whole, reflects the suffering, decay, and death, not only of the

Puritan Petrie line, but also of American dedication to self-determination, God and, perhaps, art, itself. The death of self-determination and religion are nothing new in this age of mind-control and the death of God. The threat of the death of art, however, is Oates's personal flirtation with the ludicrous demon. Fossum observes that, "In her world, the only order is that of art, the only one in control is the artist herself;"¹¹¹ the conclusion of The Assassins supports this view and indicates that Hugh's hints about art are only Joyce's flirtation. Andrew and Yvonne, to whom order and control were of the essence, are dead; the once-mystical Stephen, devoid of God, has returned to earth. Groping for control, he asserts in the closing words of the novel, "I can accommodate myself to anything" (536). Whether or not he really can achieve control or will drift into nothingness like Jules in them is a question for the controlling author, practically the sole survivor of her grotesque American nightmare, to consider.

¹¹¹Fossum, p. 297.

CHAPTER IX

CHILDWOLD: EDEN COUNTY REVISITED

Joyce Carol Oates returns to Eden County in Childwold, her eighth novel, which features maturer portraits of the Eden County natives who appeared in With Shuddering Fall and A Garden of Earthly Delights.

Although grotesque elements of distortion, exaggeration, madness, and fragmentation pervade Childwold, no analysis is possible without some initial consideration of its highly refined technique. It so radically differs from the more traditional narratives which characterized all of her earlier novels except The Assassins, that one critic claims it is not even a novel but rather a narrative prose poem.¹¹²

Childwold consists of six chapters, each of which is divided into numerous sections ranging in length from one word to fifteen pages. Each section reflects a single character's viewpoint, sometimes through stream of consciousness, sometimes from standard narrative perspective, generally from the first person point of view but, in the case of one character, from the second. The realities viewed by these characters are not directly communicated to the reader, but

¹¹²Richard Bready, "Joyce Carol Oates's Mysterious Landscape," Review of Childwold, Panorama, 9 October 1976, p. 9.

seem to be filtered through an invisible but very palpable central consciousness who weaves the many narrative threads into a semi-coherent whole, often providing incongruous shifts in perspective as the narrative moves from the highly abstract discussions of one character to the almost embarrassingly mundane ramblings of another.

Another major innovation is the peculiar sequence of the novel. The first paragraph appears to have taken place after the rest of the novel and many of the individual sections are flashbacks. Fitz John Kasch, a close contender for the main role in the novel, seems to justify his creator's technique when he thinks, "I want no unity, no false unity. I want no forced chronology, no lying emphasis upon one fact at the price of excluding others, I want nothing hypocritical and synthetic" (313). He goes on, perhaps defending the interior perspective adopted by his creator and seems to be paraphrasing Virginia Woolf when he reflects:

the interior life constitutes the authentic life, and actions performed in the exterior world are peripheral. Reality is what I am thinking, what is thinking through me, using me as a means, a vessel, a reed, even, streaming through me with or without my consent; the interior life is continuous, unhurried, almost undirected, unheralded. Flow of thoughts, feelings, emotions, observations. Broken reflections. The glittering, winking look of the river. Surely our outward gestures are misleading, surely our deepest selves are mocked even by our good deeds, our charity. The sinister "self" that is photographed. Frozen in one attitude. Alien. An exaggeration.¹¹³

¹¹³These words echo Woolf's statement in "Modern Fiction:" Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as

This technique of focusing on the character's interior life heightens the grotesque impact on the reader by placing him close to, if not within, the senile consciousness of old Joseph Hurley or the deranged consciousness of Kasch, for both of whom the world is, indeed, estranged. The varied and wildly shifting perspectives also illuminate the mind-body conflict which is central to the novel, thus highlighting the concept of the grotesque as exaggeration. As Bryant observes, "The real world of the human being is neither a world of god-like, immutable abstractions nor chaotic animality,"¹¹⁴ and Oates demonstrates this fact more vividly than she did in With Shuddering Fall by closely alternating between extremely abstract and grossly physical perspectives.

The overly-intellectual Kasch's passages vividly exemplify both ends of the spectrum, depending on his mood and subject matter. His reflections are often quite abstract but his closing poem is so abstract as to be almost unintelligible:

THE PILGRIM

Beware, beware!--desire springs forth
Beware, wishes fulfilled!
Death: Triumph: Death (238)

This contrasts sharply with some of his previous reflections, most notably the earlier scene in which, on a more physical and intelligible

possible? . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. The Common Reader (New York: Harvest Edition, 1953), p. 155.

¹¹⁴Bryant, p. 112

plane, he recalls how he habitually masturbates:

A ring of mean-eyed flush-cheeked devils observes, grinning, chuckling, tittering like monkeys, ringed about the ceiling of whatever squalor Kasch has sought refuge in, eyeing him in bed, in his bachelor's bed, goading him onward, on to the most vile conclusions, Kasch groveling in Kasch, no lover but Kasch (17).

The real world seems to lie somewhere between these dual perspectives of Kasch's, and somewhere between his cerebral ruminations and the sluttish Arlene's animalistic panegyrics on the joys of sex and pregnancy or her dreary lists of household chores.

The mind-body conflict is further dramatized by the poles traversed by Laney, Kasch's fourteen-year-old lover. Along with Arlene, her mother, Joseph, her senile grandfather, and countless siblings and half-siblings, she inhabits a rundown farm, a veritable waste land of "chaotic animality," surrounded by wildflowers and weeds. In one of his more lucidly concrete moments, Kasch describes the farm as "a universe of trash, of beauty" (51).

Under Kasch's influence, Laney escapes this chaos to embrace abstractions, discovering that

Life is organization, life is temporality, complexity, interactions that can be observed but not explained. There is always a direction to it--always a design. It insists upon its own fulfillment. It is that triumph of organization at the molecular level over a tendency toward chaos. But it is not to be understood, not even by its most scrupulous, faithful observers (198).

Perhaps the same ultimately applies to Oates's technique in Childwold with its frequent shifts in chronology and perspective and its abrupt descents from the sublimely abstract to the ridiculously mundane. As difficult as this technique may be to follow, it nevertheless highlights

the grotesque elements in the novel, from the distorted perspectives and fragmentation of some of its madmen to the exaggeration of its saner characters.

II

The waste land of Childwold lies outside Yewville in Eden County, the same strange land young Jesse describes in Wonderland as "the underworld. . . , the bottom part of the real world, reflected in a substance like water" (51). It is the same country in which Clara Walpole Revere finally acquires her own garden of delights, sensing "that the very sweep of the land did not let people stay small and allow them to hide, but somehow magnified them" (GED, 151). Although Childwold differs radically in technique from the previous Eden County novels, it is a gallery of Eden County archetypes, all rendered larger than life, if not by the land, then by the peculiar styles which define their sections of the novel. Kasch, a recently returned native of the county, is so much larger than life that he will be considered in a separate section, but three generations of the Hurley clan, old Joseph, Arlene, and Laney, typical Oates representations of the declining patriarch, the earth mother, and the upwardly mobile daughter, will be examined here.

Like Kasch, one of his doubles, old Joseph Hurley, seeks a new life but, at eighty-three, is a bit late. Extracted and read chronologically, the sections on Joseph, like the title story and "Swamps" in By the North Gate, constitute a novella which focuses upon a failing old Eden farmer. Joseph is not himself grotesque but evokes a sense of it because his senility so radically estranges him from his world,

a world the reader views through his eyes.

Grotesque motifs season Joseph's memories and nightmares. Depressed by the sight of Josef, an old friend crippled by a stroke, Joseph senses that his contemporary "had been shrunk by the doctors and nurses, his fluids drained out by the tubing, . . . a boring old man with a pale skull that looked dented. . . ." (65). The sight evokes spectres of Joseph's long-forgotten childhood and with the clarity of a retrograde amnesiac, he recalls a haunting story:

The Death-Angel is very tall, Joseph, do you know how tall? No, taller than that! Taller than the roof, even. There are eyes all over him. Not just the eyes in his face, like yours, but all over--in the back of his head; in his chest, on his back, at the tips of his fingers. The eyes are always open. They see everything. They see you. . . . He has a hundred eyes, a thousand eyes. They never sleep. They never blink (64-65).

Tormented by demonic nightmares, Joseph rarely closes his eyes, either. He rises at dawn to view his land, which, as the reader gathers from the perceptions of the other characters, is dreadfully rundown. A sense of estrangement arises when the real situation is contrasted to his memory that

in his prime he'd owned two hundred fifty acres, along the river and far to the southeast, to the Yewville Road, he owned it still, it was really his. He knew it all. Had worked it all. It was his (21).

Eschewing the comforts that the elderly sometimes find in organized religion, Joseph can embrace only the land which, in a sense, he has deified. Karen Herz reflects when she returns to Eden County from her bloody odyssey, "No ground is holy, no land divine, but that we make it so by an exhausting, a deadly straining of our hearts" (WSF, 213), and by just this kind of "exhausting, deadly straining," Joseph

has made the land his sanctuary, but at the expense of his spirit.

After emigrating to America as a boy, he had rejected his Irish Catholicism:

Father and mother dead in the west of Ireland and who's to care, to mourn? Not me. Not Joseph Hurley. Cast out into the Atlantic, given away like a pauper's child, an orphan, a foundling. Youngest of twelve. Who's to care? No religion for me, thank you. No priests. No taxes and special collections, no monasteries and missions and convents to support, no thank you, no building funds, no prayerbooks, rosaries, Masses in honor of the dead, no holy days of obligation, no stations of the cross, no holy water, no blessing of the throat, no blessing of the house, no baptism for my babies, no first communions, confirmations. . . no extreme unction. And no purgatory. And no hell. No! None of that.

My philosophy is: this is the New World. . . . No religion here: just land (78-79).

Ironically Joseph discovers hell after all, in the waste land he had so arduously cultivated. Without spiritual values to fall back on, he finds the deterioration of his sacred land even more traumatic than would a religious person. He takes some comfort in compulsive remembering, as did the younger, uprooted Carleton Walpole in A Garden of Earthly Delights. In a senile ramble that begins with a painfully precise recipe for fish chowder, old Joseph's memories wander to people: "I can cast the net out again and again. . . I cast it out and haul it in and. . . and there she is, my Anna. . ." (77).

Ultimately, the memory net disintegrates and, obsessed with remembering, with "getting back" to his dream river, he literally drowns himself. Although Joseph's drowning in the river may fail to effect the renewal conventionally ascribed to ritual immersion, the gesture is not without its meaning. Because it moves Joseph out of his decayed Eden, beyond the reach of the ravages of time, it affirms life

in the mode of many novels of recent decades. It is like the symbolic action described by Olderman, a gesture "that transcends tensions and moves the hero beyond the waste land if that action coincides with the moment of death. . . ."115

Moving from Joseph's rather sublime style to his daughter, Arlene's ridiculously pedestrian reflections is one of the abrupt, jarring non-transitions mentioned in the previous section of this chapter. Like her father, Arlene is an Eden County archetype, a perpetually pregnant earth mother. She inhabits a chaotic waste land but is too involved in her bodily processes, in her animality, to attempt to order it:

Chuckie sick and the kitchen a mess and the little boys' room upstairs smelling so bad because the mattresses were stained and it was too cold to air them out, . . . and her room cluttered, and the children underfoot acting like maniacs, the stairs littered with shoes, broken Christmas toys, towels, used kleenex, crusts from that morning's toast. . . . the furnace didn't work right, the upstairs rooms were always freezing and that smell--that smell was from the furnace, it was acting up all the time now and nobody would come out to repair it. There was only the one toilet downstairs, it too was acting up, and the shower stall was filthy, Arlene knew it was filthy and was meaning to clean it one of these days, but she didn't think kitchen cleanser was strong enough and she was afraid to use toilet cleanser, it was so strong, she was waiting to get to Yewville to buy some special ammonia spray, somebody had told her that would do the trick, but the tile was so cracked, everything was so old, it would be a full day's job to get it clean. And that drip!--just listen to that drip. . . .

Dust balls, balls of fluff, tiny frail near-invisible strands of cobweb on the walls, up near the ceilings especially. Stains on the rugs, on the floorboards. Glasses and plates and silverware left in the oddest places (172).

The opposite of the compulsive housewife (to an almost pathological

115Olderman, p. 21.

degree), Arlene draws her main pleasures in life from other sources than the mythical gleaming washloads and sterile floors. Sex with any man she can find provides her with deep satisfaction: "it's when I feel most alive. . . that, and being pregnant. God, how I love it, I love it. I can't get enough of it" (128). Unlike the frigid Helene Vogel in Wonderland, who regards pregnancy as an invasion, a violation, and a terrible imposition, Arlene derives a sense of power from it. Despite the fact that her husband died years before, Arlene has managed to satisfy her cravings for sex and its frequent result by a succession of casual affairs:

how she wanted this, this, how she loved it, her entire body filled and throbbing slow with life, it did not matter that the men deserted her, that they died, killed themselves in car wrecks and had no insurance and no savings and no thoughts of her--it did not matter: only this mattered, and she had it (59).

To many, such mindless animality appears more grotesque than Helene's equally extreme cerebrality. To Arlene, however, any venture out of the realm of pure flesh is terrifying. This is especially evident when she discovers Laney reading one of Kasch's abstract treatises on the psyche:

Arlene felt that she would never be young again: not only would Laney outlive her, and live a life she could not control, but Laney was already grown from her, slipped far from her, beyond Childwold (73).

Lean, hungry Laney is another Eden county archetype. Like Clara, she yearns to rise above the waste land she inhabits. Unlike Clara, or her mother and the girls in the romance magazines she devours, she is not "sinful and selfish and cruel and ignorant," imagining "the very center of the universe lay between her legs" (180). Laney yearns

for something more than mere physical gratification. When Kasch takes her to an art museum for the first time, she reacts as did young Clara on her first trip to "civilization," reflecting, "you're almost angry for no reason you can comprehend, you don't understand, you are alarmed at your own emotions" (120).

Emotions are not the only facets of her evolving self that frighten Laney. Her body and its functions also terrify her. Unlike the repulsive Sally in "At the Seminary," who virtually flaunts her menstrual blood, Laney recoils both from it and the maturity it heralds:

Red-earthly wet, narrow rivulets aching. The pit of the belly aching. You were terrified the first time, your hands shook, you heard the whimpering in your throat: a small hurt animal. What was happening to you, to you? Momma had told you what to expect, Nancy had told you, your cousins and your friends and girls at school, you understood perfectly well, you had read about it, even, in the magazines your mother had lying around the house, you knew about babies, there was no mystery. . . .no one could frighten you. Yet it began, began suddenly, one hour of one otherwise unremarkable day, the sensation of weeping, the pit of the belly aching, weeping, aching, a corresponding ache in the throat, as if you must weep for the loss of blood, for this blood, so dark, red-earthly dark, so secret. Your hands shook. . . . Earth-wet, sluggish blood, a look of dirt, soil about it, fascinating, frightening, a secret not to be named. To yourself you whispered it. Now it is coming, now it is come. You ached with it (160-61).

Laney refuses to accept the message this monthly phenomenon proclaims to all women, the reminder that "you don't own your body. . . you don't control it, you mustn't try, you must float with the current, . . . you must close your eyes and move with it" (163). Laney cannot surrender this easily: as a means of controlling her body, she develops anorexia nervosa, a disorder commonly found in overachieving

teenaged girls who simultaneously reject their femininity and physicality. Perhaps Laney fears that if she succumbs to the demands of her body, she will turn into the sow that Arlene has become.

Under Kasch's guidance, she escapes "the cheap pretensions" of her "carnival of a room," her "tiny desperate kingdom" plastered with ugly prints and filled with dime store junk, much like Clara's tiny room in Tintern (89). He succeeds in "saving his dirty little 'angel'" from the waste land of Childwold but as her fortune rises, his falls. At the end of the novel, Kasch, driven totally mad by his attempt to embrace the physicality represented by Arlene and her brood, retires as a hermit to the old Hurley homestead. Ironically, the sale of the farm to Kasch contributes to Laney's college costs, and ultimate escape from Childwold.

III

The career of Fitz John Kasch, like so many of Oates's characters, vividly dramatizes a grotesque process of distortion. The only son of Yewville's most prominent family, Kasch returns at forty to lose his mind on the scene of his youth, dragging memories of a failed marriage, several books of poems, and a Harvard dissertation on savagery and mysticism behind him. Keenly aware of the intellect-emotion, mind-body conflicts within his personality, Kasch tries to reconcile his sharply contrasting drives:

Kasch the lover, Kasch the ascetic. Kasch the drooling pawing self-pitying mess, Kasch the enlightened spirit, balding head haloed, weak watery eyes redeemed. . . . Read of a split-brain patient, left/right selves unaware of each other. "Selves." The right was mute, highly emotional, violent. The left was analytical, verbal,

"civilized." They were strangers. They had never met. Ah, yet we think of ourselves as one person! We hug that delusion to our deaths! Not just the mad who are split but all of us, brains split as if with an ax, one side in authority, one side the self, and the other quietly waiting . . . Doppelgänger not a myth. Quite real (130-31).

In his obsessive effort to reconcile his two selves, Kasch destroys both, ending up a vegetating hermit with "No interest in any living beings" (245).

Even before the marked deterioration after he moves in with Arlene, Kasch is not especially whole or healthy. Like many of Oates's heroes, he feels that time has estranged him from himself and even senses that he has lived through several separate selves, none of whom he can recognize any longer: "We outlive ourselves. We look back and recognize no one" (101). He remembers the old high school he attended, now razed and replaced by a new structure:

My boyhood, myself: gone. I could, if I wished, summon back the high school; but I could not summon back that boy. He is not only gone, he has never been. He has never existed. A stranger, a frightening stranger! . . . A certain force, perhaps no more than linguistic habit, connects me with the Fitz John of those years, a boy in his mid-teens, but I have no true memory of him, no feeling for him (104-105).

Unlike old Joseph, who compulsively remembers all he can of his eighty-three years, Kasch, only half Joseph's age, shrinks from memories. He delays visiting an old aunt because, as he explains,

I will be forced to contemplate my old, outlived life, which I no longer recognize and no longer claim. I repudiate not the past itself, not history, certainly, but the neurotic attachment to it, the emotional nets cast into it that impede spiritual development. For to the extent that I am Fitz John Kasch, with a specific history, specific desires and attachments. . . I am deprived of freedom (111).

Ironically, Kasch's mania for freedom through emotional detachment renders him as inauthentic as would a mindless devotion to the good old days. Although he claims to be "pure consciousness" (103), Kasch is too divorced from his old selves and from the time from which they arose to be authentic.¹¹⁶

Kasch admits that his intellectual pursuits had stifled his total personality development and indicates its grotesque exaggeration when he recalls his

determination to develop my gift for words at any cost and to allow my other gifts to atrophy, to plunge fiercely into the life of the intellect, a warrior, a cunning warrior disguised in this quite unremarkable body. Not a life of reason, perhaps, but a life by reason directed (151).

Kasch recalls three former mentors, all scholars, critics, and poets whose overly developed intellects contributed to their downfall. He reflects that he had ignored these omens,

Omens all. Amusing? No. Familiar? Yes, surely. Unfortunately. The life of reason, a life of words, a life "devoted" (as we used to say) to the arts: contaminated as if from within by something not merely nonrational, not merely irrational, but positively demonic (152).

¹¹⁶As Bryant explains, Dasein ["Being there"] Heidegger's term for pure consciousness, must acknowledge both the past and the future in order to be authentic. This consciousness of the self as "a historical being, with a past and a future," is essential in order to produce

a respect for the integrity of the self, a respect which emphasizes its intelligibility and its duration from the past to the future. A diminishment of consciousness means a diminishment of freedom, and either a totally slavish dependency upon the past simply because it is the past, or an indifference to it altogether. Either of these states is "inauthenticity," p. 61.

Thus, Kasch's idea of himself as "pure consciousness" is a bit ironic. Obsessed with becoming free of the past, he is merely enslaved by a different master.

In an effort to exorcise this demonic element from his own personality, Kasch seems to regress to an almost subhuman state. As he approaches Laney for the first time, he describes how he was

prowling behind bush, pulling at pursed lips, rubbery drooling lips, Kasch the monkey, Kasch the spiritual pilgrim, in retreat from the world, driving life into a corner, there to suck its marrow and taste and assess and transcend (16).

He had initially planned to end his life altogether by hanging himself but the sight of Laney changes his plans:

By merest chance, in one direction the maggot-swarmed corpse with that idiot's tongue, in the other direction a ninety-five-pound angel, gray-eyed, fair hair curly, aureole about her head, small pursed lips, small hard breasts, suntanned, lovely, the breath knocked out of Kasch, an exclamation torn from him. Torn (16).

Although this "soiled angel" and "lily of the snowfields" (47) comforts Kasch for a few months, his interest evolves into an obsession as unhealthy as his previous mania for words.

When Laney fails to satisfy him, Kasch imagines that earth mother Arlene holds his last chance for regeneration and he tosses out his dissertation, The Pensées, Eckhart, the Bhagavad Gita, Walden, Whitehead, St. John of the Cross, and The Cloud of Unknowing to embrace a new mode of existence, the purely physical. The death-in-life that awaits him, a significant grotesque element in the novel, will be considered in the following section on the grotesque situations in Childwold.

IV

Kasch, with his alternating obsession with intellect and body, Arlene, in her total absorption in physicality, Laney, in her fear of

it, and old Joseph, in his estrangement from the real world, all present aspects of the grotesque. As stated previously, the grotesque impact of Joseph and Kasch is intensified by the technique of presenting their deranged consciousnesses as if from within.

Other grotesque motifs sharpen Oates's recent portrait of the waste land of Eden County. Kasch's fragmentation, explored in the previous section, is underscored by the fact that he has two doubles, which only heightens the sense of his loss of identity. As Wegs points out, this loss "frequently reveals itself in doubling as well as in diminished and shattered personalities."¹¹⁷

Not only are there several facets to Kasch, but, as Oates seems to suggest, there are parts of him in other characters. Arlene's son Vale, a Viet Nam veteran, shares several of Kasch's qualities. Like Kasch, he consists of several selves but Vale has been shattered by more than time. A war injury totally estranged him from himself and from his family: "'Vale Bartlett' was just something he wore, like this suit. He needed it to walk around in. He hid behind it, behind the face. . ." (127). Although a masterpiece of modern medical technology, the newly restored Vale can no longer relate to his favorite sister, Laney, who senses:

They killed him. Where he was sent. They killed him, he was dead, he disappeared, someone else was shipped back, Vale died, Vale had been smashed, his face wasn't put together right, the two halves did not fit, the new teeth were too white, like porcelain, it wasn't Vale, Vale died, was sent away in a gigantic jet plane and never came back (23).

¹¹⁷Wegs, p. 15.

Thus, Vale's fragmentation is all too literal while Kasch's is merely figurative. Like Kasch, though, Vale is Laney's rescuer. Just as Kasch ultimately rescues her from a sure death due to drug use, alcoholism, or terminal boredom in Eden County, Vale had fished her out of the river years ago when she nearly drowned. The parallel ends here, however. Vale's tendency to violence--he recalls having pounded an ancient turtle to death for the thrill of it--is deeply ingrained. Kasch kills Earl Tuller, Arlene's brutal former lover, with a rock, too, but in reluctant self-defense.

Doubling is also evident, but to a lesser degree, in Kasch and old Joseph. Both seek new lives, one in old age, the other at mid-life; neither weathers the passage. But while old Joseph's quest ends on an affirmative note, Kasch's drives him deeper than ever into the waste land. The suicide he considered at the beginning of the novel perhaps would have been less painful than the inverted rites of renewal he attempts instead. That his pursuit of Laney is related to lost youth is evident in his obsession with

paedomorphosis, whereby the organic universe can revitalize itself indefinitely. The biological clock can be rewound, there is sometimes an escape from the cul-de-sac of evolutionary "progress," it is a hideous possibility because it involves sexual maturation at the juvenile stage. . . . The animal is ready to breed while still displaying, it is said, juvenile or larval characteristics: often the adult stage is never reached. It is not necessary. And so the species is rejuvenated because it squeezes out the overspecialized adult stage.

Paedomorphosis: the shaping of the young.

We become increasingly infantile, primitive, in order to survive (67).

Thus, instead of transcending his mid-life stage to embrace the next one, Kasch tries to regress to an earlier stage of development in his

pursuit of a near child.

When that incongruous pairing fails to reduce his life to the pure emotion and physicality he seeks, Kasch pursues Laney's primitive mother. The epithalamium he composes as he prepares to move into the Bartlett's chaotic hovel is a ludicrous hymn to an almost equally incongruous match:

The Bridegroom is hurrying to his Bride. What must be must be. I am equal to any fate. I am the author of myself. . . . I am new, I am improvised, I am sheer joyful invention, nothing can stop me. My Bride awaits. My Brides (210).

Not a week after his wedding feast of yewseeds, Kasch's effort to renew himself ends in the manner typical of all such efforts in the waste land:

Kasch left. There is no one. Nought. Kasch is molecules, atoms, particles, nought. Kasch the poet, Kasch the lover: battered to death by Kasch the murderer. He is gone, gone. Scooped up and buried along with his lusty rival. . . . I am in perpetual mourning now, my insides cringe and slither in mourning, my guts are afire with sorrow; Oh my friends, I am punishment enough for Kasch. I am a suffering reed, a frail trembling membrane, nothing more, I am so sorry, my friends, when will you see fit to extinguish me? For there is immortal life, I have discovered: nor are we out of it (240).

Kasch has given the reader a glimpse of his hell, of the estranged world in which the fear of life is indeed more terrifying than the fear of death,¹¹⁸ but one must not regard his failure to weather it as indicative of any darkening of Oates's vision. Like Jesse and the lawyers in Do With Me What You Will, he serves as a warning to all who would live too much in the abstract.

¹¹⁸Kayser, p. 185.

Considered as a whole, Childwold is far less pessimistic than With Shuddering Fall, in which the hero dies and the heroine is left "nowhere with nothing," or A Garden of Earthly Delights. The Walpoles and the Reveres are all doomed and damned by the end of their novels, but the Bartletts share some hope of survival. Arlene has a new man; Laney escapes to college; sister Nancy's runaway husband returns. Like Oates's ideal heroes, they all, to some degree, "awaken, come alive, move into the future,"¹¹⁹ however mundane it may be. If Laney's aspirations seem ominous, there is some hope that she will take Kasch's downfall more to heart than he did the degeneration of his idols and mentors; that, by integrating both mind and body, both intellect and emotion, she will not become grotesque.

¹¹⁹Joyce Carol Oates, "New Heaven and Earth," Saturday Review, 4 November 1972, p. 51.

CHAPTER X

OATES'S GROTESQUE WOMEN

Oh, we women know things you don't know, you teachers, you readers and writers of books, we are the ones who wait around libraries when it's time to leave, or sit drinking coffee alone in the kitchen; we make crazy plans for marriage but have no man, we dream of stealing men, we are the ones who look slowly around when we get off a bus and can't even find what we are looking for, can't quite remember how we got there, we are always wondering what will come next, what terrible thing will come next. We are the ones who leaf through magazines with colored pictures and spend long heavy hours sunk in our bodies, thinking, remembering, dreaming, waiting for something to come to us and give a shape to so much pain (t, 320).

As if in response to Maureen Wendall's complaint, Joyce Carol Oates "gives shape," often in grotesque fashion, to the pain of being female. Although her men are just as likely to become grotesque, their grotesquerie is not as inextricably bound to their masculinity as in the case of her women, whose femininity is a major source of the grotesque. In order to survive at all, these women develop grotesquely disproportionate obsessions with either asserting or denying their femininity.

There is no doubt that the female body, with its foul discharges, pregnant distortions, and analogy to the "hell mouth" provides fertile material for the grotesque. As Mary Allen observes,

the body is a liability. . . , always out of control, the center of pain and the source of excretions that proliferate in Oates's work: vomit, blood, diseased

tissue, menstrual blood, and the newborn child itself, the most terrible excretion of all.¹²⁰

This negative view of the female body is also evident in society's view of it, as poet Adrienne Rich notes:

Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood--that same body with its bleedings and mysteries--is her destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent. . . , those who seem to lead the freest lives.¹²¹

For most of Oates's women, none of whom lead free lives, the body is a shameful, inescapable source of powerlessness and a mark of their vulnerability to predatory men. In only one short story, "At the Seminary," does Oates clearly "affirm the mystical potentialities of women"¹²² and even then she must resort to a grotesque devaluation of religion. Sally Downey, an overweight young woman on her way to spinsterhood, visits her younger brother, a seminarian whose cleanliness compulsion has already scarred his hands like stigmata. Staring

¹²⁰Mary Allen, The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 137.

¹²¹Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976; A Bantam Book, 1977), p. 15.

¹²²Constance Ayers Denne, "Joyce Carol Oates's Women," Nation, 7 December 1974, p. 598.

at the Christ she imagines lies suffocated and buried beneath the finely sculptured crucifix in the gleamingly sterile seminary chapel, Sally identifies with Him:

A minute flow of blood. She did not move, paralyzed, her mouth slowly opening in an expression of awe that it might have been religious, so total and commanding was it.¹²³

As her menstrual blood continued its downward flow, Sally "felt the hot blood on her legs. She was paralyzed, charmed" (105); but her brother stared "as if he had seen something that had turned him to stone" (106). Unashamed, Sally reflects

But this isn't my fault. . . I never asked for it, I never asked God to make me a woman! . . . Each heavy step, each ponderous straining of her thick thighs, centuries old, each sigh that swelled up into her chest and throat, each shy glance from her brother, all these faded into a sensation of overwhelming light or sound, something dazzling and roaring at once, that seemed to her to make her existence suddenly beautiful: complete: ended (106-107).

Peter, outraged by her deliberate fouling of his sacred retreat, attempts to strangle her, sobbing that he "can't leave now" (107). By means of her grotesque "miracle," the flaunting of the most obnoxious aspect of her already obnoxious flesh, Sally dooms her terrified brother to deny his own forever as he becomes one of the plaster Christ's stony priests.

For most of Oates's women, however, the flesh is nothing but a source of powerlessness. Maureen Wendall, incessantly sleeping and

¹²³Oates, "At the Seminary," in Upon the Sweeping Flood (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1966; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest Books, 1972), p. 104.

eating in a grotesque parody of Sleeping Beauty as she recovers from her stepfather's brutal beating, awakens briefly to wonder

What does it mean to be a woman? How do these people endure it, how do they keep going?--dragging about in the envelope of their bodies, their skin puffy over their bones, living. They keep on. Sleeping. Maureen herself is sleeping. A bulk at rest. In her body nothing moves, in her brain nothing moves, everything is bloated, gluttonous, at rest, sleeping (t, 300).

Her brother, Jules, is also keenly aware of women's powerlessness, as his adolescent daydreams of becoming their savior indicate:

They were bewildered, confused, fearful. He dreamed of offering his brains to them, putting himself in their service, helping them through a bus ride or across a street or when their husbands came home drunk. A woman in a laundromat in Detroit only appears to be in control! Inside, her machinery is as wobbly and nervous as the machinery of her car. . . (t, 93).

The womb, the ultimate source of women's powerlessness,¹²⁴ is also a source of debilitating shame. In "The Dreaming Woman," the unnamed narrator reflects that

She has been ashamed of her body off and on for years. A body is something you must live in. This body is as good as any other but why must there be a body, why? Oh, the shame of young girls, their passion and humiliation! Time stopped in this girl's life when she saw a certain film in sixth grade, a heart-stopping film. . . . now that she is older and uses this body easily, still an old sickness sometimes returns to her. Up and down the length of her there is a sudden heavy dread.¹²⁵

Not only is the womb a source of shame and powerlessness, but,

¹²⁴Rich, p. 52.

¹²⁵Oates, "A Dreaming Woman," in The Seduction and Other Stories (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 259.

ironically, it remains intact long after the woman's body has decomposed, as Elena Howe learns from a forensic pathologist in Do With Me What You Will. Terrified, she wonders

Then how could you get rid of it?

They didn't say it would shrivel up without any child in there to keep it moist and elastic. They said it would not rot, would not burn, would not go away, would remain like a shoe buckle or part of someone's bridgework or one of those small fossil fish you can buy for a few dollars to set upon a rack in your husband's study, on display like a cup and saucer (DWM, 128).

Most of Oates's women have enough difficulty dealing with the living womb without reflecting on its permanence after death. It is no more within the scope of this study to conduct a rape survey than it is to attempt a casualty count but rape does seem to occur as frequently as murder in Oates's fiction, and probably more frequently in her short stories.

In "Demons," Eileen, an imprisoned spinster, a contemporary version of Faulkner's Emily, provokes her assailant to rape her, quite literally over her father's dead body, while her mother lies dying upstairs:

Eileen gave herself up to this man, and the mask of her face was stripped off between his hard white teeth, leaving a film of pinkish-red blood and membrane, the pulsing of minute and wild veins he might take between his teeth and gnaw.¹²⁶

Although she is a willing victim, Eileen epitomizes Oates's numerous women who seemingly exist only to be devoured by men through marriage and interminable successions of pregnancies, if not by outright rape.

¹²⁶Oates, "Demons," in The Wheel of Love (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1970), pp. 254-55.

Reading through Oates's work to date, one can only validate Adrienne Rich's general remark that "the body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit."¹²⁷ As Oates explicitly states, only when women have been "delivered from the machine of our bodies," can they hope to become "truly spiritual."¹²⁸

In Oates's fiction and in the society it reflects, women seemed doomed to madness and grotesquerie whether they shrug off their bodies or endure them. The previous considerations of With Shuddering Fall, A Garden of Earthly Delights, them, Do With Me What You Will, The Assassins, and Childwold indicate that marriage, motherhood, and spinsterhood equally guarantee physical and/or psychic distortion, violation, degeneration, and sometimes total annihilation. As Phyllis Chesler notes in Women and Madness,

What we consider "madness". . . is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype. Women who fully act out the conditioned female role are clinically viewed as "neurotic" or "psychotic."¹²⁹

Whether she passively depends on a man, enduring an incessant succession of pregnancies according to the traditional model, or whether she rejects this stereotype and pursues an autonomous existence,

¹²⁷Rich, p. 22.

¹²⁸Oates, "Out of the Machine," Review of Prisoner of Sex by Norman Mailer, Atlantic, July 1971, p. 44.

¹²⁹Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972; Avon Books, 1973), p. 75.

Oates's woman almost invariably appears grotesque, either because of her exaggerated "assertion" of femininity or because of an intense denial of it. As Rich observes of society in general, "the woman scholar and the welfare mother. . . both are 'marginal' people in a system founded on the traditional family and its perpetuation."¹³⁰

Central to this tradition, of course, is mating. Nadine Greene, Jules's wealthy suburban lover in them, expresses it perfectly when she complains:

"A woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream of waiting. I mean, she lives in a dream, waiting for a man. There's no way out of this, insulting as it is, no woman can escape it. Her life is waiting for a man. That's all. . . She has no choice" (t, 345).

Maryliz Tone in "Happy Onion" seems to have no choice. The prospect of living without her fiancée, rock star Ly Cooper, is unthinkable. She is so completely attached to him that when he dies, she achieves the ultimate merging as "Ly's bride in black, his beautiful, permanent darling."¹³¹ Maryliz witnesses his autopsy in a grotesque consummation of their relationship, to which Ly's rock group's theme song provides appropriate background music:

peeling the onion
petals that pry away and weep
peeling the onion
crying us all to sleep---(238)

Most of Oates's women drift into marriages described by contemporary psychologists as "'the long quiet walk, hand in hand, to the

¹³⁰Rich, p. 291.

¹³¹Oates, "Happy Onion," in Marriages and Infidelities (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1972), p. 238.

grave'" or "'the tit-lined coffin,'"¹³² in which all autonomy and individuality are submerged. Dr. Reaume, the aging psychiatrist in "The Sacrifice," traces one of his patient's nightmares to such a relationship, reflecting that

She had buried herself in her husband--her masculine self sacrificed, in fact beheaded, so that she could maintain a perfectly ordinary Washington marriage, performing a role, acting as a priestess in the ritual sacrifice of her own spirit.¹³³

As if she anticipates a similar fate, Grace, the beautiful, intelligent bride-to-be in "Pastoral Blood," grotesquely identifies with the mechanical girl in the shop window,

staring and beautiful, fleshless yet nicely human, with an arm sweetly extended and moving slowly back and forth, displaying on one finger a diamond ring. The mechanical girl flaunted her purity. . . .¹³⁴

To escape transformation into a mere puppet, Grace sheds her tasteful suburban wardrobe for bargain-basement rags and embarks on a binge that nearly ends in her death. When she miraculously survives, she resolves to plan her next suicide attempt more carefully, rejecting "the ease of insanity--bloodless suicide, suicide for cowards" (91).

Adultery, a frequent occurrence in Oates's short fiction, debilitates the women as much as, if not more than, the marriages they

¹³²Nancy Friday, My Mother/My Self (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977); A Dell Book, 1978), p. 411.

¹³³Oates, "The Sacrifice," in Night-Side (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1963; Fawcett Crest Books, 1971), p. 78.

¹³⁴Oates, "Pastoral Blood," in By the North Gate (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1963; Fawcett Crest Books, 1971), p. 78.

seem to be escaping. In "Unmailed, Unwritten Letters," a wife writes to her husband of eight years about her affair, complaining:

I am a woman trapped in love, in the terror of love.
Paralysis of love. Like a great tortoise trapped in a
heavy deathlike shell, a mask of the body pressing the
body down to earth. . . . 135

In order to free herself of this trap of adultery, really just another form of marriage, she literally starves herself "To keep myself from feeling love, from feeling lust, from feeling anything at all" (70).

If love and marriage threaten to transform Oates's women into unfeeling, mechanical puppets, motherhood guarantees a loss of self, if not actual death in many of Oates's novels and short stories. As she herself states in a discussion of Norman Mailer's Prisoner of Sex, the anguish of motherhood is dehumanizing:

to suffer, to feel, to be changed--it is a way of realizing that we live. But it is also a way of becoming dehumanized, mechanized. In fact, a way of dying.

To be mechanically operated, to have one's body moving along in a process that the spirit cannot control, to have the spirit trapped in an unchosen physical predicament--this is a kind of death. It is life for the species, perhaps, but death for the individual. Throughout human history women have been machines for the production of babies.¹³⁶

Constance Ayers Denne observes that this idea is transformed into a major theme in Oates's fiction: "Because of the impossibility of ever meeting the outrageous demands of children, motherhood is perceived as always and inevitably a death sentence."¹³⁷ In

¹³⁵Oates, "Unmailed, Unwritten Letters," in The Wheel of Love, p. 61.

¹³⁶Oates, "Out of the Machine," p. 44.

¹³⁷Denne, p. 598.

connection with the heroines of A Garden of Earthly Delights and Expensive People, she observes that

the principal question the women face is how to act in accordance with their inner authority and still meet the responsibilities of external relationships. Oates is pessimistic about the possibility of finding an answer, for in both novels hungry sons will kill their mothers for crimes of which the women are not even aware.¹³⁸

Children need not even will to kill their mothers as do Swan and Richard. Their mere existence often poses a deadly threat to the mother's life. Young Clara is keenly reminded of this fact when she sees a cat bleeding to death on the road, reflecting that

It was all so fragile, this flesh and blood; look how her mother had died. One night a man had climbed on top of her and months later, months later she had died because of it. That was how it was (GED, 133).

The rapid succession of births in fields and roadside ditches first deprived Pearl of her sanity. As Clara recalls,

She was usually pregnant. One by one the babies had turned her back into a child. . . . The babies had kept coming and Pearl's mind had buckled under them, giving way, and the last baby had killed her (GED, 132).

Although ambitious young Clara vividly recalls her mother's miserable life and death, she feels inescapably programmed to repeat the cycle:

This was the way life would be, then. But did all women have to go through it? . . . What was so terrible for Clara . . . was there was nothing else. . . . There had been nothing else in the world for them, nothing, except to give themselves to men, some man, and to hope afterwards that it had not been a mistake. But how could it be a mistake? There was no other choice (GED, 132).

This barely literate migrant working child's reflections clearly

¹³⁸Ibid.

present the dilemma faced by all women, even the more advantaged and educated. As Adrienne Rich observes,

The twentieth-century, educated young woman, looking perhaps at her mother's life, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuating, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom.¹³⁹

Nancy Friday goes a step further, asserting that motherhood deprives women of more than individuation, freedom, and creativity: "The glorification of motherhood demands that when her child is born, autonomy over her own emotions must end."¹⁴⁰

The plight of Nora Akenside Drexler, the retiring, brilliant Harvard Ph.D. in "Magna Mater," demonstrates the imprisoning, stifling aspects of motherhood. Despite her intelligence and accomplishments, Nora cannot escape her son's tyranny and finally ceases her attempts to assert her right to an independent existence. Although eleven-year-old Dennis claims to be tormented by nightmares about "a mouth. . . a mouth in the room with him, in the dark, a mouth chewing and grinding and making wet noises. . .,"¹⁴¹ one suspects that he is only hearing himself devour his mother.

Another suffering mother, Barbara Scott Arber, balances

¹³⁹Rich, p. 154.

¹⁴⁰Friday, p. 39.

¹⁴¹Oates, "Magna Mater," in The Goddess and Other Women (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1974; Fawcett Crest Books, 1976), p. 197.

motherhood and creativity but must resort to alcohol and compulsive overeating to alleviate the strain. When her husband impregnates his young mistress, Barbara magnanimously commits suicide so the girl will not need an abortion. "'She did it for the baby, to preserve life,'" her husband raves as he marries young Dorie.¹⁴² When she acquires three sons instantly and a daughter a few months later, Dorie realizes that the noble Barbara has achieved revenge after all: "She felt strangely cheated, a part of her murdered, as if the abortion had taken place that day after all, and something had been cut permanently out of her" (149). That something is, of course, the promising intelligence which her instant family so cleanly excised from Dorie. Adrienne Rich summarizes this plight as it affects women in general:

Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self.¹⁴³

In Helene Cady Vogel of Wonderland, Oates provides perhaps the most poignant exploration of the agony motherhood inflicts on the ambitious, educated woman. A scientist with advanced degrees, Helene, like many of Oates's women, fears and distrusts her body:

She wanted to be loved but to be separate and suspended, inside the idea of love, so that the man might exist in a part of her mind, chastely. Always she had feared her body (W, 265).

Frigid and virginal, Helene is terrified of a love that would impose

¹⁴²Oates, "Accomplished Desires," in The Wheel of Love, p. 147.

¹⁴³Rich, p. 24.

pregnancy, a too fleshly state for her ethereal tastes:

She was suspended in a fearful, cautious state, cautious especially of Jesse's love, as if surrendering to him would infect her with that coarse blatant bodiliness she hated so in other women (268).

In her disgust with the body, Helene resembles the Sylvia Plath Oates describes:

Plath understood well the hellish fate of being Swift's true counterpart, the woman who agrees that the physical side of life is a horror, an ungainly synthesis of flesh and spirit--the disappointment of all the romantic love poems and the nightmares of the monkish soul.¹⁴⁴

Even greater than her fear of love and disgust for the body is her terror of losing control over her own body, and pregnancy threatens Helene with just such a loss. As Adrienne Rich observes, "Motherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control."¹⁴⁵ Thus, she opposes Jesse's desire for a family in order to maintain her control:

she defended her separateness, her crystalline, frightened body: why couldn't he understand how bad an idea it was to have a baby now? Why couldn't he understand her fear of the pain, the bitter, inevitable ripeness her body had to suffer? And then she would be a mother for life. For life. She did not want to be a mother (265).

Helene vividly demonstrates this attitude when she attempts to abort herself with a gynecologist's speculum. When she recovers from her fit of rage, Helene views herself as if from a distance:

¹⁴⁴Oates, "The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath," in New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1974; Fawcett Crest Books, 1978), p. 131.

¹⁴⁵Rich, pp. 268-69.

And suddenly she saw a young woman lying on a table. Herself, contorted like that: a woman on a table, on her back, her face twisted and demented. She had fallen from a great height and her face was twisted permanently.

"Mrs. Vogel. . . . ?"

What was that raw reddened gap between her legs? So vivid it sucked all the air into it--the entire white sky might be drawn into it and lost--a face more powerful than her own face, a raw demanding mouth (278).

When her tantrum in the doctor's office fails to bring on her two-month-late period, Helene decides to abort herself with a knitting needle:

she would run hot water in the bathtub and undress and sit in the tub, her legs slowly spreading. She would ease the thing up into herself. Angrily and calmly. Its pressure would be very sharp and very thin, unlike the broad, coarse pressure Jesse brought to her.

Pressure. Then a sudden sighing release as the needle sank in.

The water pinkening with blood.

What she must remember is to leave the tub unplugged and the water on. That way there would be a continual flow of fresh water, splashing and hot. The blood would drain out and new water would rush in and everything would be clean (280-81).

Helene postpones the procedure for too long, however. Just before their daughter's birth a few months later, Jesse, unaware of Helene's similar plan, treats her double, a young woman who has actually aborted herself with a jagged juice glass.

Helene barely endures the pregnancy and birth and emerges from the experience filled with feelings of shame and alienation:

the birth had left her exhausted and at a distance from herself, from her own body. Her baby had overwhelmed her. She was ashamed of herself and it occurred to her that she must have another baby, another baby to make her normal, a real woman. But after the second baby nothing was different. She felt a final, terrible certainty about her strangeness: she would never become a real woman (412).

Years later, the menopausal Helene, controlling her self and her life as rigidly as her husband, Jesse, controls his, rejoices at her

new freedom:

It was over: the tyranny of her body, the yearning for other bodies, for talking and touching and dreaming and loving. She had freed herself. It was over for her (424).

Although old age and death cannot be too far away, Helene is happy for the first time since her youth because she will never again be a prisoner of her body, of her children. Never again will she lose the control that she, like her soulmate Jesse, so highly prizes.

Grotesquely rigid and frigid though she may be, Helene survives motherhood with at least a few shreds of sanity and ego intact. Few of Oates's mothers are so fortunate. As Charlotte Goodman observes,

Unable to gain autonomy over their lives, and threatened by a brutal world where violence against them may break out at any moment, Oates's female characters often become anxious or depressed, and sometimes retreat into madness, which confers upon them the blessings of safety and peace.¹⁴⁶

A young daughter in "Matter and Energy" observes a group of these women when she visits her mother in a psychiatric ward. She views the lounge filled with women "shapeless and contented, sleeping and smiling, probably all mothers," in utter horror, and assumes that

Drugs keep them at the bottom of the ocean. My mother's eyes are feverish with the fight she makes against falling asleep, against surrendering. If she surrenders, something will happen to her, she thinks. . . "They do things to the brain," she says. "They operate on it. First they stick a needle in you and press your knees down on the table and you fall asleep, then they do anything they want. . . they scoop out your insides. . . they pick around in your brain.

¹⁴⁶Charlotte Goodman, "Women and Madness in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates," Women and Literature 5 (Fall 1977): 28.

Another mad mother describes the violation committed by her psychiatrist in similar terms:

You must have turned women upside down and inside out; you must have poked them and listened to their hearts and smelled their smells, which they couldn't help; you must have cut up the bodies of dead women; yet you still believe in the mystery, don't you? You still believe. But I don't. I looked at my daughter and it was looking at myself in a mirror. . . .¹⁴⁸

Projecting her own self-loathing onto her young daughter, the woman murders her child by driving over a cliff but is unable to remember the accident; she is concerned instead about the man she imagines preceded them down the road.

That Oates's mothers are driven to madness and murder by their children is not surprising when one considers the strain imposed by their role. As Phyllis Chesler observes in her psychological study,

. . . most mother-women give up whatever ghost of a unique and human self they may have when they "marry" and rear children. Most children in contemporary American culture invade their mothers' privacy, life space, sanity, and selves to such an extent that she must give up these things in order not to commit violence.¹⁴⁹

The mother in "I Was In Love" struggles to maintain her sanity by imagining that she is really two selves: one, the passionate adulteress, and the other, a house-slave and mother:

A woman spends time before mirrors, content to imagine herself always in a mirror, somewhere, her truest self,

¹⁴⁷Oates, "Matter and Energy," in The Wheel of Love, p. 344.

¹⁴⁸Oates, ". . . & Answers," in The Goddess and Other Women, p. 166.

¹⁴⁹Chesler, p. 290.

while her body walks around in the world. It is the mirror-self that certain men love, and that loves them; the other self is busy scraping garbage off plates and emptying the drier of great hot coiled heaps of sheets and towels and underwear and socks. It is the mirror self that loves without exhaustion, loves with passion and violence, with tears; the other self puts the stained sheets in the washing machine and turns the dial.¹⁵⁰

It is also the mirror self which, fresh from an adulterous afternoon, drives her young son to commit suicide by jumping to his death from their moving car.

Sonya, the pill-popping divorcee in "Wild Saturday," cannot refrain from committing violence despite her efforts to anesthetize herself. Although she has sedated her son for days to keep him from interrupting her drug trip, she flies into a rage when he wets his bed. Crazed by the drugs she has been devouring, Sonya (fortunately) mistakes a rubber doll for her son and proceeds to remove its eye from the socket with a spoon, screwing an earring into its place. Although the reader may react with some slight cringes, young Buchanan, who observes the procedure, is terrified by this grotesque violence.¹⁵¹

Ginny of "The Children" is perhaps the most terrifying mother in Oates's fiction because her violence erupts so suddenly. Although highly educated, she gladly retreats into the protective shells of fat, suburbia, and motherhood after her marriage. Terrified by the possibility that Gower, a demented neighbor child, has taken possession

¹⁵⁰Oates, "I Was In Love," in The Wheel of Love, p. 405.

¹⁵¹Oates, "Wild Saturday," in The Wheel of Love, pp. 150-69.

of her daughter's soul, the once rational Ginny nearly kills Rachel in her attempt to exorcise Gower. A more basic cause of her fury is revealed, however, when Ginny tries to break her daughter's

fine delicate bones that were an outrage to Ginny, so perfect were they, so finely structured to last that lifetime, a lifetime that had taken itself out of Ginny and would run and run away from her and never come back, stinking with the mud of great distances and beyond all the range of Ginny's voice. "A bad girl, you're a bad girl!" she cried.¹⁵²

Having given up her autonomy for the sake of "the children," Ginny would rather kill them than allow them independent existences of their own.

Had Ginny remained single and pursued her career, she might have preserved her autonomy and sanity but this rejection of the traditional female role would also have rendered her grotesque. Most of Oates's female intellectuals are portrayed as distorted, frigid, sterile misfits. Ilana, the successful young writer in "The Dead," burned out by years of pill-popping and gin-guzzling, "felt how intellectual she had become, her entire body passive and observant and cynical,"¹⁵³ incapable of any feeling for an old lover. In a similar manner, Clare Dougherty, the divorced young English professor in "The Snowstorm," takes pride in her fierce independence:

She was too intelligent to hold onto anything, even memories; too intelligent to make any claims on anyone else. . . . No end to her intelligence! It swirled about her feet, inviting her to fall and crack her head on the

¹⁵²Oates, "The Children," in Marriages and Infidelities, p. 235.

¹⁵³Oates, "The Dead," in Marriages and Infidelities, p. 473.

bumpy ice."¹⁵⁴

Isolated from her past, Clare is a faceless, inauthentic, fragmented figure, as smothered by the avalanche of her imposing intelligence as she is isolated by the blizzard that paralyzes her car.

Beatrice Kern, a young art teacher in "The Widows," envisions the distortion caused by her intelligence in visually grotesque terms:

But she was too intelligent. Some part of her had developed too shrewdly, like a head that has grown out of the drowsy earth and can now gaze down upon it--a head on a long stalk --an eerie drunken-swaying stalk of a neck!¹⁵⁵

If Oates evokes the distorting aspect of the grotesque through her intelligent women she evokes its demonic aspect through her creative ladies. This is not, however, a modern phenomenon. As Rich observes, "For centuries women have felt their active creative impulses as a kind of demonic possession."¹⁵⁶ Thus Elena must curb her demonic urges to write better fiction by crippling her mind and body with drugs and alcohol.

Frigid Pauline, a twenty-nine-year-old sculptress who confines her creations to human heads, drives Tony, a demented would-be suitor, to stab himself to death. Imagining that she has been impregnated by his blood during his attempted decapitation, Pauline starves herself and ends her days in a mental hospital where she dreams she has

¹⁵⁴Oates, "The Snowstorm," in Night-Side, p. 92.

¹⁵⁵Oates, "The Widows," in Night-Side, p. 33.

¹⁵⁶Rich, p. 54.

become the angel of death.¹⁵⁷

No matter whether or not they assert their femininity through conventional marriage and motherhood, or deny it through intellectual or creative pursuits, all of Oates's women seem angels of death, a far cry from the Victorian "angel in the house." Her only resolution to the female dilemma is dramatized by Nina Weber, whose response to the pain of being female reaches beyond the usual methods of drugs, alcohol, adultery, and abuse to complete annihilation. In "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body," Nina assumes her father's identity after he dies by donning his clothes and moving into his cottage,

strangely quiet, fulfilled, as if under a final spell

So she was no longer a woman: she withdrew. Her delusion was finished. She wanted to draw into herself the terrible experiences of her life--the violence of her fear of them--and, in herself, bring them to nothing.¹⁵⁸

It is only through such nullity, Oates seems to say, that women can transcend their loathsomely problematical selves to exist as persons.

As she herself emphasizes in "Out of the Machine," "There is no reality to the 'class' of women. . . . The only reality is personality. Not sex. Not sexual identity."¹⁵⁹

Through her fiction, Oates vividly demonstrates the grotesquerie

¹⁵⁷Oates, "Bodies," in The Wheel of Love, pp. 256-281.

¹⁵⁸Oates, "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body," in The Wheel of Love, pp. 332-33.

¹⁵⁹Oates, "Out of the Machine," p. 43.

that results when women, imprisoned by society's concept of "sexual identity" or obsessed with rejecting it, fail to achieve personality, which, for Oates, is "the only reality."

CHAPTER XI

THE GROTESQUE OF ACADEME

One might hope that academe, perhaps the last bastion of civilization in contemporary America, would bar grotesques from its hallowed confines, but the view Oates presents in her short fiction indicates that the campus breeds grotesquerie as freely as the dreary stretches of Eden county, the flawlessly groomed gardens of suburbia, or the teeming slums of her urban novels. Lea Gregg, the disturbed, suburban brat in "Free," isolates one cause of academic grotesquerie as she fondly recalls her college days:

"the very sound of the tower bells, and the way the students shuffled in and out of buildings. . . and, oh, the way the professors droned on and on. . . there was something charming and safe about it, as if it were under a glass bell. . . ."160

In Oates's world, the campus indeed seems to be enclosed by a glass bell, not unlike the bell jar that suffocates Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood with madness in The Bell Jar. Survival in the closed system of Oates's version of the academic world almost always demands inauthenticity, fragmentation, psychic distortion, and dehumanization, with resultant sterility, degeneration, and, in some cases, total madness.

¹⁶⁰Oates, "Free," in The Goddess and Other Women, p. 133.

In one of her early stories, "The Survival of Childhood," Oates portrays grotesque fragmentation in a working-class boy who escapes to academe. Carl Reeves, a thirty-three-year-old English professor, hesitates, like so many of Oates's heroes, to acknowledge ties to any previous existence:

His life here in this expanding industrial city, teaching grammar and literature to factory workers' children whose hard eyes showed distrust, was so different, so altered, from his past life, that the reality of his link with those back-country people, with the back-country boy he himself had been, staggered his mind.¹⁶¹

Even more staggering is the realization Carl must absorb when his younger brother, Gene, commits suicide. A wild, artistic boy who had left home early but returned to care for his aging parents, Gene, obsessed with the face of an ancestor who appears in his dreams, shoots himself in order to join her. Carl confronts the estranging aspect of death when he finds Gene "with one side of his face blown away" by a rifle whose barrel disappears "into a raw red hole at his chin."

Carl feels

a revulsion that had nothing to do with the fact of death, or its physical horror, but attached itself to the phenomenon of change--of metamorphosis--that death had worked in Gene. He was in the presence of a stranger (45).

Carl tries to reclaim this stranger, whom he now recognizes as his double, by taking his job in the town post office. He finally realizes that his brother stifled his creative instincts, buried himself in the backwoods, and ultimately died so Carl could pursue a

¹⁶¹Oates, "The Survival of Childhood," in Upon the Sweeping Flood, p. 32.

successful academic life in the city. But the fragmented Carl returns to the city in the end, refusing to be "deluded by mythical bonds of responsibility and selflessness that would have drained his energy, distracted his vision of himself." Carl again has severed the hollow but "complex links--of relationships of blood, of emotion, of economic accident" (38), but, sadly, of humanity, itself.

The denial of one's roots does not always result in such extreme fragmentation. Sometimes it takes the form of an obsession as in the case of Franklin Ambrose, the black Harvard Ph.D. in the ironically titled "Up From Slavery." He so intensely denies his racial background that he acquires a British accent, several white lovers, a white wife, and then flees to a small Canadian college which attracts him because it has few black students and even fewer black faculty members:

"Franklin was not 'black.'"¹⁶² Thus, when a young woman he succeeded in having hired spurns him and reminds him that, as a woman, she bears a history of oppression similar to his own, Ambrose is so enraged that he has her fired.

Under the bell jar of academe, obsessions tend to intensify because of the very abstract tendencies of the characters. As noted in the first chapter, Oates's intellectual characters' obsessions with abstractions render them as inhuman as the barely human rural types in the Eden county stories. These obsessions lead to decadence in the

¹⁶²Oates, "Up From Slavery," in The Hungry Ghosts: Seven Allusive Comedies (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), p. 64.

sense Thomas Pynchon describes in V.:

A decadence is a falling away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories.¹⁶³

Besides dehumanizing them, these obsessions alienate the characters from reality, a reality which, as Bryant insists, "is neither a world of god-like, immutable abstractions nor chaotic animality."¹⁶⁴

In the academic community, however, where reality seems to consist solely of god-like, immutable abstractions, it is almost impossible for Oates's characters to remain human, much less treat others as human beings. Klein, the suicidal, starving teaching assistant in "Archways," illustrates the trend Tanner notes in connection with V., a growing tendency,

discernible on all levels and in the most out-of-the-way pockets of modern history, for people to regard or use other people as objects, and, perhaps, even more worryingly, for people to regard themselves as objects. There is in evidence a systematic and assiduously cultivated dehumanization of the human by the human.¹⁶⁵

Klein utilizes the body of one of his students to ease himself out of his depression, but when he recovers, disposes of her: "He had never loved her. . . perhaps she had freed him, giving herself and thereby freeing him to himself."¹⁶⁶ Like Reese, whose death-in-life in the

¹⁶³Pynchon, p. 405.

¹⁶⁴Bryant, p. 112.

¹⁶⁵Tanner, p. 159.

¹⁶⁶Oates, "Archways," in Upon the Sweeping Flood, p. 162.

backwoods freed him to pursue a more abstract life, Klein's use of the girl frees him to continue his. Years later, conventionally happy in an academic post, Klein can rationalize his inhumanity to the girl:

"What possibility of happiness without some random, incidental death?"
(162)

Donald, the anthropologist in "Problems of Adjustment in Survivors of Natural/Unnatural Disasters," does not coldly utilize his son but he is unable to relate to the seriously disturbed boy--or anyone--on a personal level. As he explains,

"I wanted to pare myself down so there wasn't all that personal, emotional confusion about me--I wanted to be--well, to be universal--to get down to a universal core--"

This universal core, Donald believes, is the only "alternative to suicide."¹⁶⁷

For many of Oates's academics, work is so essential to their being that there seems to be nothing but "universal core" beneath their gowns. Nora Akenside Drexler, failed wife, unsuccessful mother, but tremendously successful teacher and critic in "Magna Mater," demonstrates this lack of personality. Only through her work can she transcend her sad existence through an almost sexual ecstasy:

When she spoke of her work she seemed to move into another dimension entirely--she was not the overweight, perspiring, rather too anxious hostess, but a consciousness entirely freed of the body, of all temporal limitations, and it seemed to her the ultimate gesture of love--when any man

¹⁶⁷Oates, "Problems of Adjustment in Survivors of Natural/Unnatural Disasters," in Marriages and Infidelities, p. 121.

. . . simply asked her the correct question--What are you working on. . . ?¹⁶⁸

Howard Dean of "The Sacred Marriage" illustrates a similar phenomenon. Defined by nothing but his academic role, he was "absolutely free, uncommitted, still awaiting, at the age of thirty-seven, the event that might change his life and give it value."¹⁶⁹ This event occurs when Emilia, poet Connell Pearse's young widow, admits Dean to "a sacred place" (17), her late husband's workroom, and then to their bed. Almost transformed into his idol, Pearse, by their brief love, Dean feels that "the boundaries between the three of them became hazy" (28). No longer a bloodless Casaubon, he shoves aside Pearse's once tempting notes, realizing that "a living woman was worth more than a dead man's novel, any dead man's novel or his poetry or any poetry. That was a fact" (31).

When Emilia admits another scholar to the sacred workroom and seems intent on leading him to the sacred bed, Dean examines Pearse's papers again, finding notes for a parable. He suspects that Pearse, like the novelist in the projected parable, selected Emilia as a mere vehicle through which he will continue to dispense rays of his "divinity" after his death (34). Dean returns home, loveless but now obsessed with bringing "Connell Pearse to the world's attention: that was his mission, the shape of his life. It was a sacred obligation

¹⁶⁸Oates, "Magna Mater," in The Goddess and Other Women, p. 205.

¹⁶⁹Oates, "The Sacred Marriage," in Marriages and Infidelities, p. 8.

and he was going to fulfill it" (36). In addition to grotesquely debasing sacramental imagery, "The Sacred Marriage" traces the birth of an academic's grotesque obsession when, after a brief transformation into a human being, Dean is driven back to his bloodless, abstract state by an inhuman lover.

Another academic who is not saved by a woman's love is Father Colton of "Through the Looking Glass." The well-rounded priest-professor's study of Elizabethan drama, his campus activities, social, ecumenical, and athletic pursuits all seem to protect him from both the sterility of priesthood and the intellectual overdevelopment endemic in academic life. His fault lies, however, in his conception of the priesthood as a power so transforming that, when he was ordained,

Suddenly everything had become clear to him and he had stepped through into his new life, as if through a mirror, coming out on the other side: his priesthood had made everything possible. Everything had been explained by it--or had everything been metamorphosed? He had stepped through the mirror and come out in another world, able to deal with people because he did not quite believe in them.¹⁷⁰

Taking the truth of his priesthood a bit too literally, Father Colton, like Anderson's grotesques, renders it false. He leaves his ministry to marry Frieda Holman, a disturbed woman he imagined

was Christ, in her loneliness and suffering and the terrible danger in which she lived, and how he was Christ in ministering to her, saving her. He had no doubt about the sanctity of what he was going to do (77).

When his marriage ends after a few brief days, Father Colton, deprived

¹⁷⁰Oates, "Through the Looking Glass," in Crossing the Border (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1976; Fawcett Crest, 1978), p. 72.

of priesthood, job, and wife, mourns only

the loss of his love. His capacity to love. He had loved Christ once but now, having stepped through the looking glass and become Christ, he understood the sordid loneliness and sorrow of the Savior and he did not want to share it with anyone (80).

His whirlwind marriage to Frieda has liberated Father Colton forever from his illusions of divinity, power, and love, but has also drained all meaning from his life. After a few months of working in the post office, he imagines that he will eventually

return to the real world, without the help of Christ, stepping back across the border, back through the looking glass, into what he imagined to be the real world. He did not need love of any kind: neither to give it nor receive it (82).

No longer a whole man, Father Colton will, no doubt, degenerate into a Casaubon, just as did Howard Dean.

With the exception of Father Colton, Oates's religious academics seem even more sterile than their secular counterparts. Sister Irene, a frigid Shakespeare professor of "In the Region of Ice," has so totally dehumanized herself that she fiercely resists a student's appeal that she rejoin the human race. Like many academics, she is reduced to a role, "a figure existing only for the benefit of others, an instrument by which facts were communicated."¹⁷¹ When an emotionally disturbed student seeks her assistance, she withdraws, "terrified at what he was trying to do--he was trying to force her into a human relationship" (21). Such a basic bond is impossible for Sister Irene

¹⁷¹Oates, "In the Region of Ice," in The Wheel of Love, p. 15.

because her obsessive view of the religious life is as isolating as Father Colton's was outer-directed:

She was a nun, she was recognized as a nun and had given herself to that life, she had a name, a place, she had dedicated her superior intelligence to the Church, she worked without pay and without expecting gratitude, she had given up pride, she did not think of anything external to these, she saturated herself daily in the knowledge that she was involved in the mystery of Christianity.

A daily terror attended this knowledge, however, for she sensed herself being drawn by that student, that Jewish boy, into a relationship she was not ready for. She wanted to cry out in fear that she was being forced into the role of a Christian, and what did that mean? . . . She was alone, no one would help; he was making her into a Christian, and to her that was a mystery, a thing of terror, something others slipped on the way they slipped on their clothes, casually and thoughtlessly, but to her a magnificent and terrifying wonder (22-23).

Unable to lower the self-erected barrier symbolized by her habit to don the humbler yet nobler garb of a Christian, Sister Irene withdraws to the region of ice cited in the title, her own private hell, from which she coldly watches her student commit suicide to escape from his.

A far more sinister sterile religious is Jesuit Father Andrew Rollins, the history professor in "Shame" who, like Klein, has risen from humble beginnings. He passes through his native Detroit and discovers that his best friend, with whom he lost touch long ago, has died in an accident with his young son. Father Rollins visits Toni, the widow, and after an uncomfortable dinner in her pathetic slum apartment, he viciously destroys the parting gift she had pressed into his hand,

a tiny, perfect egg, a lovely blue, a miracle achieved by some forlorn, enslaved robin. "What the hell is this?" he muttered. He closed his hand suddenly upon the egg and smashed it, and when he opened his hand again there

was just a mess there. . . .¹⁷²

The slum boy has been so completely transformed into a scholar-priest that his failure to sympathize with human suffering or to appreciate the small wonders of nature is downright chilling. So sterile is Father Rollins that a sincerely offered token of life is "just a mess" to be disposed of.

Degeneration seems to be a price of success in academe, as the Arbers in "Accomplished Desires" and Ilena in "The Dead," vividly demonstrate. Both Mack and Barbara Arber deteriorate physically and emotionally as a result of their success: "Being 'established' should have pleased them, but instead it led them to long spiteful bouts of eating and drinking in the perpetual New England Winter."¹⁷³

Ilena Williams, the acclaimed author of Death Dance, recalls how she wrote the novel in an attempt to vent the frustration she felt as an overworked, underpaid instructor at the University of Detroit, frustrations she also released by consuming drugs and alcohol. Years later,

Ilena thought back to her Detroit days and wondered how she had survived, even with the help of drugs and gin: the central nervous system could not take such abuse, not for long. She had written a novel out of her misery, her excitement, her guilt, typing ten or fifteen pages an evening until her head throbbed with pain that not even pills could ease. At times, lost in the story she was creating, she

¹⁷²Oates, "Shame," in The Wheel of Love, p. 126.

¹⁷³Oates, "Accomplished Desires," in The Wheel of Love, p. 135.

had felt an eerie longing to remain there permanently, to simply give up and go mad.¹⁷⁴

Many of Oates's academics demonstrate this grotesque progression from the healthy to the diseased, a progression which often results in madness. As Michel Foucault observes in Madness and Civilization, the groves of academe are a fertile breeding ground for insanity:

the life of the library, abstract speculations, the perpetual agitation of the mind without the exercise of the body, can have the most disastrous effects. . . . The more abstract or complex knowledge becomes, the greater the risk of madness.¹⁷⁵

Oates's literary scholars exhibit many forms of madness, but most often it is a form of paranoia that drives them to ruin themselves and their colleagues in attempts to implement insane, sinister plots. As Dr. Robinson Thayer, a mad Renaissance scholar warns Barry, his new teaching assistant in "The Birth of Tragedy,"

"It's a very complex, sinister world here--but of course exhilarating, if you don't weaken. It's like a Shakespearean play--without the fifth act. The fourth act just goes on and on, scenes of high tragedy alternate with scenes of the most contemptible, gross comedy. . . .

"This world is all drama. As long as you know that and realize that other people are feverishly writing scenarios in order to trap you in them, you'll survive."¹⁷⁶

As Barry learns all too soon, Dr. Thayer knows well whereof he speaks. When the boy recoils from Thayer's manic efforts to seduce him, he is dropped from the program, relieved to be free of Thayer's clutches but

¹⁷⁴Oates, "The Dead," in Marriages and Infidelities, p. 462.

¹⁷⁵Foucault, pp. 217-18.

¹⁷⁶Oates, "The Birth of Tragedy," in The Hungry Ghosts, pp. 112-13.

still terrified of "that small kernel of sanity" at the core of Thayer's madness (130).

Dr. Reynold Mason, another paranoid madman and colleague of Thayer's in "A Descriptive Catalogue," fumes because Ron Blass, M.A., the poet-in-residence, received a promotion before him. A Blake expert who had studied with Northrop Frye, Mason sets out to expose Ron as a plagiarist by presenting

page after page of evidence, lines from a poem "by Ron Blass" cruelly and horribly compared to lines from other poems, a maze of cross-references that left Ron bewildered, empty, sick.¹⁷⁷

Ron saves himself--and drives Mason totally mad--by researching the sources of his colleagues' scholarship. After they read through the contents of the mysterious manila envelopes he has stuffed in their mailboxes, they less mysteriously exonerate Ron.

Saul Bird, a professional revolutionary in "Pilgrims' Progress," who hops from one campus to another, leaving ruined lives in his wake as he pursues wild schemes to overthrow traditional education, goes on another rampage when Hillberry College does not renew his contract. He seduces two unlikely candidates for his cause. Erasmus Hubben, a prissy philosophy professor, descends from the quiet comfort of his ivory tower when Saul taunts him:

"People like you. . . have been allowed to live through books for too long. That's been your salvation --dust and the droppings of tradition--but all that is

¹⁷⁷Oates, "A Descriptive Catalogue," in The Hungry Ghosts, p. 87.

ending, as you know."¹⁷⁸

Erasmus's breakdown and spectacular striptease act provide added entertainment during the Bird coterie's attempted takeover of the humanities building.

Wanda Barnett, Bird's other draftee, loses her tooth, and possibly her job in the takeover but Saul offers neither apologies nor comfort and begs her to spare him the details as he tries to escape "this hellhole" (58), a hellhole of his own creation. Frozen in depression, Wanda gives up on her dissertation, realizing that Saul's friends were right when

they asked her bluntly how she could devote her intelligence to the analysis of an insane 17th-century preacher when the world about her was so rotten? . . . The world was a nightmarish joke, unfunny (45-46).

Oates revisits Hillberry in "The Transformation of Vincent Scoville," a graphic account of grotesque degeneration. Isolated, bored, and homesick for New York, Woolf scholar Scoville is transformed from a "Byronic, cupidlike, utterly charming"¹⁷⁹ sophisticate into a madman. The victim of one of the insane plots Dr. Thayer so perfectly described, Scoville is commissioned by the alcoholic, senile college president to examine the juvenile letters of one Violet Kipling-Horne, supposedly Rudyard Kipling's niece. After a brief examination, Scoville deems them worthless but following a luncheon with President

¹⁷⁸Oates, "Pilgrims' Progress," in The Hungry Ghosts, p. 44.

¹⁷⁹Oates, "The Transformation of Vincent Scoville," in Crossing the Border, p. 147.

Swanson, he contacts "Swanson's monomania" (171). Once a source of strength and sanity, his teaching becomes an annoying distraction, now that Scoville has

begun to discover the essential intricacies of the Kipling letters: a certain voice. . . a certain repetition of key images, motifs. . . curiously enough, rather similar to image clusters to be found in Kipling's "The Peacock's Tail," written at about the same time the letters were written. . . . The entire project would take years (183-184).

Scoville's mission is futile but he is too insane to realize what the sane but miserable Nora Drexler admits of her highly reputable work: "None of this will save us."¹⁸⁰ Those who fanatically pursue success --academic or otherwise--as a means of salvation, are almost surely destined for misery, if not total madness. Ronald Pauli, the untenured, insecure professor in "Democracy in America," fails to realize this fact, even though his "success" demands a harrowing quest for his manuscript. His only copy of his dissertation, recently accepted for publication, is lost in the nightmarishly foul apartment of a demented editor who dies suddenly while he is working on it. For Ronald, the book is "the one certain thing, the one reality,"¹⁸¹ and he valiantly keeps nausea, panic, and terror at bay as he crawls through the layers of filth and garbage in the apartment in search of it:

Everywhere there were books and magazines and papers, as if blown back and forth across the room by a mad wind, coming to rest in corners, beneath pieces of furniture, on top of dirty dishes. Ronald wanted to laugh, it was so horrible. Everything lay under a kind of spell, weighted-down, cold,

¹⁸⁰Oates, "Magna Mater," p. 28.

¹⁸¹Oates, "Democracy in America," in The Hungry Ghosts, p. 19.

horrible. And the odor! It was not one odor but many. He could almost see the promiscuous swirls of separate odors, rising like fumes from tin cans, from teabags and crusts of bread and dirty socks. . . . Beneath his foot was a typewritten page. He saw that it was stained with dried juice from a tuna fish can that had been tossed onto it. . . (16).

By crawling through the filthy chaos, he somehow extricates all three-hundred-eighty-five pages of his manuscript to emerge weeping and drained but triumphant:

Someone had tried to destroy him, but had not succeeded. His manuscript was crumpled, torn, stained with the dirt of a total stranger but it had not been destroyed. And he had not been destroyed.

"I'm still living," Ronald whispered (29).

Unlike Nora, who perceives the void that lies just beneath her frantically produced pile of accomplishments, Ronald, totally inseparable from his manuscript, imagines that he has been saved because it was salvaged.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

Verily, verily, travellers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses, of our own bad passions.

Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit, II, xxx

Whether she deals with physicians or attorneys, farmers or slum-tenants, migrant workers or her fellow academics, Oates seems to warn, through the nightmares they encounter, of the danger of excess, an excess she underscores through her use of the grotesque. Whether characters are distorted in perspective, like Richard and Kasch, or whether they enact a process of degeneration, like Karen and Shar, Clara and Swan, and Maureen and Jules, they serve as a warning against the emotional exaggeration which so frequently proceeds from distortion in Oates's world. Often centering on a desire to achieve autonomy or to free oneself of the past, these obsessions only result in loss of autonomy, fragmentation, and madness. Clara and Swan lose their minds in their quest for autonomy, just as Jesse, Nada, Maureen, Jules, and Yvonne shatter into fragments when they too passionately try to become whole by denying their pasts. Similarly, her women either drown in their womanhood or shatter by denying it, just as her academics, physicians, and attorneys lose their humanity in their pursuits of greater glories.

Her most extreme grotesque characters are those who would become gods. By passionately pursuing divinity through their medical and legal professions, Jesse, Perrault, Pedersen, and Howe discover only the demonic. Her ultimate portrait of demonic passion is the subject of the satanic title of her latest novel, Son of the Morning, which chronicles the rise and fall of Rev. Nathanael Vickery, whose pentacostal preaching evokes an underside of religion that America has come to know only too well. Although it is not yet possible to provide a complete overview of Oates's development, one can remark that the obsession with materialism, so evident in A Garden of Earthly Delights, Expensive People, and, to a degree, in them, has given way to obsessions with more abstract forms of power: medical, legal, and spiritual.

As death and destruction become even more prevalent in American society, there is little wonder that Oates's more recent novels such as The Assassins and Son of the Morning appear darkly disturbing. They merely reflect a nightmarish world in which daily newscasts recount far more terrifying events. With such a ready source of sick thrills at America's fingertips, one may wonder why so many have nevertheless entered Oates's nightmare world.

Perhaps, as the mad narrator proclaims in "Plot," they are seeking the perverse comfort of peering at others' sorrows:

You read, people like you, only to whistle through your teeth and think: Jesus, there's somebody worse off than I am! Why else read, why plow your way through somebody else's plots? A "plot" is not fiction, as you know, but very real; it is the record of someone's brain, a trail like a snake's trail, sticky and shameful. . . . 182

¹⁸²Oates, "Plot," Marriages and Infidelities, p. 209.

Perhaps they find comfort in her use of language--"all we have to pit against death and silence,"¹⁸³ as she creates nightmares which actually end, if only in the final syllable of a story.

In none of them is Oates attempting the sort of social criticism evident in such earlier novels as Dickens's Hard Times, Sinclair's The Jungle, or Wright's Native Son. Rather, she is projecting a social vision through which, as she explains, she attempts "to dramatize the nightmares of my time, and . . . to show how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move into the future."¹⁸⁴ By further distorting and exaggerating her portrait of a society that already distorts its members, she dramatically illustrates how often its obsessions lead, not to awakening or even survival, but to loss of control, madness, fragmentation, and death.

¹⁸³Remarks by Joyce Carol Oates Accepting the National Book Award for them, in Grant, p. 164.

¹⁸⁴Oates, "New Heaven and Earth," Saturday Review, 4 November 1972, p. 51.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Kathleen Burke Bloom has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

3/22/79
Date

Thomas R. Gorman
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